



Facing
"Rosen
Kavalier"

機巧少女は

傷つかない

Unbreakable Machine-Doll

海冬レイジ



Illustration
nono

「さようならです、雷真」





「ドイツ独逸の人形よ。」

おまえは既に、私の〈冬〉の中にいる」

いろりは猛烈な冷気をまといながら、
凍てつく声でつぶやいた。

「ひとや囚獄ごろし——しもくぐ霜曇り」

全身から噴き出す妖気。
暗雲のごとく立ち込める、
濃密な闇。

「目覚めよ力……ファフニール……」

〈暴虐の王〉！

シャルがありったけの魔力を込める。

光を奪う闇の中から、たくましい腕が、
脚が飛び出した。



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Prologue – As Sweet as Candy

“Oh Raishin, what if I do it like this... <3”

Her white fingertip crawling up and down, Yaya gently stroked the front of a certain something.

“Ah, it’s so hard... Ufufu, was Yaya’s fingers that good?”

Raishin let out a small groan—

“... Say, Yaya?”

“Yes? <3”

“Can you wash the dishes quietly? I mean, I’m happy you offered to do the dishes and all, but...”

They were in the ward reserved for patients, which was located on the first floor of the medical faculty, next to the doctor’s office.

There was a washbasin located in a corner of the room, and Yaya was washing the dishes there.

A sulky Yaya turned her head back towards Raishin, addressing him rather thornily.

“Leave me alone. Since Raishin doesn’t want to bother about me, I’m performing image training on these plates.”

“What kind of image training is that!?”

“Image training for washing backs.”

“That’s clearly not a gesture used to wash backs! Why are you extending your hands back and forth!?”

“Ah, maybe a rolling pin, or a frankfurter would be a better—“

A third voice interrupted, causing Raishin and Yaya to turn their heads.

Henr was standing in the doorway, dressed in her maid attire, smiling as she held the laundry.

“Eh... Ah... Um... If you’re washing things, please leave it to me.”

Her ears red, Henri took the plates away from Yaya’s hands.

Yaya began to tremble uneasily.

“Vixen... Are you trying to steal Yaya’s spotlight... and replace Yaya!?”

“The two of you! Don’t teach Henri weird things!”

An indignant voice entered, belonging to the golden-haired beauty, Charl. Her steel-coloured dragon, Sigmund, was perched on top of her hat.

Yaya had a visible look of displeasure on her face.

“... So, you’ve come again, Charlotte.”

“Of course. You have a problem? Even with Henri being protected by people from Nectar, I’m still worried she’ll get assaulted by weird people. As much as possible I have to stick close to her so that she can be safe.”

“Even if you say that, isn’t the real reason because you want to help Raishin?”

“Wha—I—You— I-diot! Such a vulgar suspicion! In the first place, taking care of the injured is merely a part of Noblesse Oblige!”

“In that case go become a nurse in the city hospital!”

“I politely decline. I’m busy with the Night Party.”

“How convenient of you to always have an excuse ready! Ah, enough! Now that it has come to this, Yaya will just have to eliminate all vixens with my full strength!”

“Music to my ears! Sigmund, obliterate this blockhead!”

Sigmund sighed, his wings flapping in the air and he made his way over to Raishin’s bed.

“Your troubles just won’t end eh, Raishin?”

“Yeah... You too huh?”

There was a moment of mutual sympathy between them as they feebly laughed together.

Yaya and Charl looked like they verge on the verge of physical violence. Henri was doing her utmost to hold Charl back. At any rate, the two sisters looked lively enough. Looking at their—especially Charl’s— good spirits, Raishin felt relieved.

Just yesterday, the headmaster had summoned the entire student body, where Charl lowered her head in front of everyone.

She apologised for destroying the clock tower and causing a ruckus centred around the headmaster.

Needless to say, seeing that T-Rex give such a frank apology had a considerable impact on the students.

The headmaster’s follow-up had been super effective as well. Thanks to a certain unknown source spreading the word, everyone knew that Henri had been kidnapped and Charl had just been trying to get her back.

In the same way a delinquent treating little animals made others think ‘wow, he must be a nice guy.’, the reason for Charl’s actions had rapidly changed the enmity the student body had been feeling into sympathy, and the hostility towards her had lessened.

Of course, not everything had been fully resolved.

The student regarded as the mastermind of the whole incident, the chairman of the executive council Cedric Granville was discovered to be under house arrest the whole time.

In other words, the person Raishin had fought wasn't the real Cedric.

So then, who was that? Was he a participant in the Night Party? If so, what had been his goal?

In the end the only thing he knew was that he knew nothing at all.

However thinking about that now was useless. He felt like he should just be grateful that the sisters had emerged unscathed from the ordeal.

“Raishin... You're looking at Charlotte with such gentle eyes...”

Raishin gulped. Yaya had switched targets to him!

“Even though you've never looked at Yaya like that before— Ah! Don't tell me, through this event the intimacy level between the two of you increased... Did you do it with the vixen behind Yaya's back...?!”

“Hell no! Don’t misunderstand things! Charl, say something!”



A red-faced Charl opened her mouth to say something, but she suddenly closed it shut and turned her head off in the opposite direction.

It was an elegant gesture that was for all intents and purposes, an affirmation. Yaya snapped and started to make a huge uproar again.

At that moment, the curtain that had been drawn was flung open violently.

Yaya was surprised into silence. Raishin reflexively braced himself for the inevitable large sword to come flying his way.

Instead, Loki sluggishly dragged himself through the opening.

He glared at Raishin with his red eyes. Unexpectedly though, he didn't say a word.

Dragging his feet slightly, he left the ward. Behind him, his steel automaton Cherubim whirled with metallic noises as it followed him out.

“... What's his problem? I was sure he was going to start a fight.”

Charl tilted her head in puzzlement. Henri had a worried tone in her voice.

“Raishin, did you do something to Loki? Did you mess him up?”

“I did not!”

Suddenly, Yaya flew over to Raishin.

“Please take off your pants, Raishin!”

“At least give me a reason for doing so!”

“Today is an auspicious day, so—“

“And what does that have to do with taking my pants off!?”

“It's a continuation from earlier! It's time to show the vixen! Show them the tender and viscous way Yaya and Raishin spend each and every night! Show

them that from the very beginning, there was never any room for fiancées or Loki or vixens in our private world~!”

While sobbing, Yaya shot the Belew sisters an intimidating glare like a threatened kitten.

However, Charl laughed it off with remarkable composure.

“I’m not falling for that anymore. I’ve already seen through your act and I know that you don’t do anything at all.”

“Charl... You finally understand...!?”

Raishin was moved. For some reason Charl suddenly blushed as she continued speaking.

“Well, I mean, you said it to me that time. You said I could hinder you for as long as I liked. That was— in other words— you would look after me... for a lifetime... right?”

Raishin couldn’t hear her. He tilted his head in puzzlement, but the intentions of what she had said reached Yaya clearly.

“Uu... Uwaaaaaaaah!”

“Eh!? Yaya!?”

Running past a stunned Henri, Yaya fled out into the hallway.

“Yaya! Where are you going—“

Yaya continued to run away. At that moment, Frey appeared in the doorway and got bowled over by the fleeing Yaya, causing her to fall onto her bottom. Her chest bounced vigorously from the impact and her open legs allowed a clear view of what was inside, causing Raishin to turn bright red immediately.

“Day after day they keep interfering with my self-study... I’m sick of it!”

While walking down a path in the middle of the grove, an annoyed Loki spat out to no one in particular.

“We’re participating in the Night Party, aren’t we? To the winner goes everything, while the losers end up with nothing, an extremely harsh zero sum game. I don’t care if they want to frolic, but at the very least save it for after the Night Party is over. Don’t you think so, Cherubim?”

[hmm... Yes...?]

“... What’s with that reaction? Don’t tell me you intend on telling me it’s interesting to observe as a third party?”

[No. No... I’m ready]

“Hmph. At this rate returning to the dormitory might actually be preferable.”

[Yes. I’m ready]

Cherubim followed behind him like a faithful hound. Seeing his regular appearance, unchanged as it always was, helped Loki to cool down a little.

(Hmph... Why am I in such a rush anyway?)

He knew the answer. It was because his injuries weren’t healing as nicely as he’d hoped— and it made him uneasy.

If it was just him alone, he would be alright. He would manage somehow. But now...

The image of Frey’s smiling face surfaced inside his mind. Loki clicked his tongue in irritation.

(How farcical....!)

Swinging his crutches violently, he forced his leg through the pain and rapidly walked down the small path.

His goal was the Raphael dormitory for boys. It only accepted students with excellent grades, and each student had his own private room. It was older than the Gryphon dormitory for girls, but in terms of service they were roughly equal.

He didn't want to attract attention. Detouring around the garden, he headed for the back entrance.

Suddenly, he felt the presence of a weak magic energy source, and he stopped.

Straining his ears, he could hear a faint voice coming from inside the trees.

It was weak and faint. It was a small voice that sounded like the rustling of clothes. This had to be...

A girl sobbing?

Loki hesitated for a moment, before setting off in the direction of the voice.

He entered the grove. Finally, he could see a small shadow illuminated by the sunlight filtering through the trees.

He wondered if this was a chance meeting with a fairy.

It was a girl. It looked like she had just run away from somewhere, and she was wearing just a one piece dress. For some reason she had no shoes on, allowing Loki to see her bare, white feet.

It was a face he didn't recognise. Which meant she was most likely not a student.

(An automaton...?)

Still, even if it was a puppet it was remarkably life-like.

There was colour in her skin, blood flowing through veins. She looked so delicate it was hard to imagine the existence of mechanic parts anywhere inside her. Her

vivaciousness really stood out. No matter how he looked at it, the tears that flowed down her face had to be real.

Building a automaton to be as life-like as possible wasn't just a matter of making it look like a human.

If not done properly, it would just look like an unholy fusion with a dead body, creating a grotesque abomination that looked like a walking corpse.

But there was nothing uncanny about this girl at all. Just from her appearance alone, there was virtually nothing to differentiate her from a regular girl. The automata at the academy were all top class, but this level of craftsmanship was guarded secretly with an iron fist— like Raishin's Yaya and Magnus's Squadron.

Noticing Loki's presence, the girl turned around in surprise.

Drops of tears scattered from her face, sparkling under the light of the sun.

“... *Weiße Kinder*.”

Hearing that term come from the girl's mouth, the area around Loki's eyes began to twitch.

At the same time, Yaya was crying while walking through the grove of trees.

“Uu... Uu... Raishin is an idiot! Even though he knows how Yaya feels...”

Drops of tears fell off her face as she continued down the path.

— It was heartrending.

She reflected on Charl's beauty, which was enough to light up her surroundings.

Her golden hair glimmered. She was taller and had better proportions than Yaya.

Yaya wondered if the only thing she had an advantage over Charl was the size of her chest.

Even then, there was no telling if Charl's chest would grow. After all, Charl wasn't a doll who had been built in a specific way, but a live human girl.

It felt like a knife had been thrust into her chest.

What she had said to the Belew sisters had now returned to slap her in the face.

For all her talk earlier about a lack of room for others, for a puppet to fit in the space between a human male and a human female would be...

She sobbed. It was an unbearable thought, and she continued to wail even louder.

“Why are you crying?”

She was so surprised the tears stopped flowing.

While still sniffing, she turned around to see a female student standing there.

She had brilliant silver that reached her waist. Her smile was calm and gentle, just by looking at it Yaya felt healed, a warm feeling enveloping her.

Yaya recognised her. This girl was in the same class as Raishin for one of his compulsory subjects.

“I believe this is the first time we're meeting. Pleased to make your acquaintance, cute little doll. I am—“

A bright smile on her face, the girl put a hand on her modest chest.

“Alice Bernstein.”

Chapter 1 – Commencement of Hostilities

(1)

“She's late. That Yaya, just what is she...”

Staring at the trees outside the window, Raishin was muttering to himself.

Behind him, the Belew sisters were sitting down in a gloomy mood. Charl's depression was particularly severe; her pitiable state was obvious at first glance.

"Why do you look so dejected? It's not like you, dragoness."

"It's... my fault. I ended up hurting her."

"Ah, stop worrying about that already. Frey's searching for her as we speak."

As he said, Frey and the Garm type automata were out searching for Yaya.

When Frey offered to go search, he felt bad about imposing on her but ending up accepting her help anyway. As Raishin was banned from leaving the room, in times like these the Garm types were reliably useful.

The door opened, and everyone's eyes turned in its direction.

The person who entered was neither Frey nor Yaya, but Loki.

He noticed everyone's stares, but wordlessly headed to his head.

Loki was spacing out. His earlier irritation had completely vanished.

Had something happened? First Yaya, now Loki, it was as if the world had gone mad.

The chair creaked as Charl stood up from it.

"... I'm going back. Henri, let's go."

"Are you going to look for Yaya? Don't bother, by now Frey's probably already found—"

"That's not it. Since I chased her away, it wouldn't be fair to remain here by myself."

"Fair?"

“Sigmund. We’re going back to the dormitory.”

With her dragon in tow, Charl left the ward.

Henri started to follow, but then timidly turned towards Raishin.

“Raishin, Um... I think you should try to treat Yaya a little better.”

She suddenly came to a start.

“S-sorry, I might have been too presumptuous!”

With that, she turned and fled after Charl.

Watching them head off, Raishin leaned against the window sill, deep in thought.

Finally, even Henri had started to reprimand him.

(... Even if she said that, what should I do?)

For someone like Raishin, who was disinterested in love, it was a difficult problem.

He knew Yaya’s feelings, and that was the problem. How should he treat her knowing so? He didn’t reciprocate her feelings, but if he was any nicer to her than he was normally, it would be insincere if that led her on somewhat.

Besides, what Yaya wanted him to do was—

The sound of rapid breathing brought him back to reality.

The rustling of grass being trampled underfoot grew louder as a pack of dogs approached rapidly.

The Garm types were lined up neatly in a row. As they wagged their tails proudly, Frey appeared behind them, with Yaya in hand.

“Frey! Yaya!”

Raishin leapt out of the window. Ignoring the pain coming from his ribs, he ran towards Yaya.

Yaya hung her head, trying to make herself smaller. The corners of her eyes were still wet with tears. Without thinking, Raishin started to yell at her, but at the very last moment he stopped himself and decided to speak to her kindly instead.

“Yaya. I was worried, you know?”

“... I’m sorry.”

“Thanks, Frey. You saved me.”

Frey shook her head from side to side.

“Raishin... saved me too...”

“That’s already in the past— wait, are you leaving already? At least let me offer you tea.”

“But, the Night Party...”

“Ah, my bad. I didn’t realise it was this late already. I’ll repay you some other time.”

“Uu... Then... next time, how a-about a date...”

Frey started to fidget suspiciously. She began to panic as she muttered something weird, like an incantation for summoning a demon, before leaping up onto Rabi’s back.

It was the signal to begin her escape. As Rabi dashed away, the other dogs followed after the pair.

Surprised at her sudden outburst, Raishin called out to her disappearing visage.

“Good luck!”

“I’ll do my best—“

She waved back at him. That gesture caused her centre of gravity to shift, and she looked like she was about to fall off Rabi.

The Great Dane tagging along behind her ran to support Frey, pushing her back on top of Rabi. Raishin chuckled, watching Frey and her dogs until they vanished out of sight.

At that moment, a mysterious and uneasy feeling ran through him.

“... Raishin? What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing...”

It was the sensation of being watched. Someone was watching him, with evil intentions.

Glancing into the ward, Loki’s sharp gaze was focused outside the window— in other words, over in his direction as well. It looked like Loki had felt something as well.

(Did he... feel it too?)

His modifications aside, Loki was one of the Promised Children. His affinity with magic energy was naturally high, and his sensitivity to it was twice the normal person’s. He was at the same level, if not higher than, Raishin’s own sensitivity.

If both of them had felt it, then it was no longer just his imagination.

Something felt suspicious. A restless feeling began to take over him.

“Get back in here, **Second Last!** Or do you want a thermometer shoved up your ass?!”

A voice from inside the ward suddenly shouted out.

Black-rimmed glasses on his face, Doctor Cruel was glaring at them with the visage of a mad dog on his face.

It seemed he had popped in to check up on their injuries. Grabbing Yaya's hand, Raishin dashed back into the ward.

(2)

A pair of binoculars watched as Raishin went back into the ward.

The owner of the binoculars was inside the law faculty, which was a distance away from the medical faculty. No matter how sharp the senses of Raishin or the Garm types were, at this distance they wouldn't be able to notice their presence... or at least, that was their expectation.

Inside a room used for debating practice, there were close to thirty shadows gathered.

Three female students, and eleven male students.

The remainder were clearly irregular existences. Clad in steel armour, there was a cloth apron worn atop their armour. There was a black cross etched onto the cloth, and a rose relief inscribed into the armour. The full face helmet gave off a solid and stern look. It was an anachronistic design that made them look like the crusaders from the middle ages.

The number of such automata were equal to the total number of students.

The spying male student let out a small laugh.

“Based off the movement of their lips, I have a rough idea of the conversation.”

Lowering his binoculars, he turned around. He was short and frail, with an androgynous face.

“There's no indication that **Second Last** and Sword Emperor will be discharged anytime soon. It looks like **Surround Roar** will be attending the Night Party by herself.”

Having said so, he directed his question into the depths of the room.

“What are your orders, *Herr*?”

Everyone in the room directed their attention to the figure.

In the centre of the room there was a round table. On the opposite end of the round table there was a gorgeous armchair.

The person sitting on the armchair gave off an air that made the armchair feel like a throne.

He had honey coloured hair that hung down, with shapely and chiselled features to go along with it. His beauty was such that at any moment it looked like roses were about to bloom in the background, but at the same time he had a rough and dangerous presence about him.

“... How careless of you, Sword Emperor.”

A cold light flashed inside his blue eyes, and he looked around the room.

“Wait until **Surround Roar** enters the field, then overwhelm her.”

“Is that really ok, Rosenberg?”

“Is it? Is it really?”

Two female students came flying from either side, giggling as they spoke.

Both of them had a tuft of hair done up to one side. Their faces were like two peas in a pod, and their heights were completely the same; putting them side by side would result in perfect symmetry. They had to be twins.

The student called Rosenberg pushed the twins away in irritation,

“The one in charge will be... *Neun*— I leave it to thee.”

“*Jawohl, Herr*. I suppose that makes me the decoy, no?”

Placing his binoculars down, the one called nine let out a girlish laugh.



“Even with the Fragarach circuit installed, ultimately ours are still old models. Make sure you lure out that *Hundefräulein* properly.”

“... Leave it to me. I’ll bring along up to *Dreizehn*.”

Several people nodded in acknowledgement.

Rosenberg lifted his chin up from his hand where it had been resting, and stood up.

“Now then, let the battle be joined. For our Fatherland— *Ruhm den Kreuzrittern!*”

““*Ruhm den Kreuzrittern!*”

Saluting in tandem, they repeated the mantra, which meant ‘Glory to the Crusaders’.

The whole affair gave off an air that furthered their resemblance to the knights of yore.

However, in the midst of the disciplined group, there was an individual that did not join in the chanting.

It was the automaton standing directly behind Rosenberg. Compared to the other automata, it was substantially smaller in size. Carrying a shield as large as itself, it joined in the salute, but didn’t speak a word.

No one noticed this at all.

The expressions on each student’s face stiffened as they gallantly strode out of the room.

(3)

It was half past six. Thirty minutes had elapsed since the Night Party started.

The sun was still going strong in the western sky, illuminating the area. Amidst the throng of lively students that had gathered to watch the spectacle, the brilliant golden hair belonging to the T-Rex Charl stood out.

With Sigmund resting on her cap, she was walking with swagger in her step.

The students automatically parted to make way for her. However, there was less hostility in the looks she was being given compared to before.

While feeling uneasy and a little embarrassed, she bought a meat pie and split half of it with Sigmund.

Compared to a few days ago, the number of students in the gallery had markedly increased.

The reason for that was fairly obvious. It was because an actual battle was finally taking place after an absence.

There was a single gauntlet holder standing inside the field already.

Although he looked twelve or thirteen, there was no way that could have been his actual age. His androgynous face looked as sweet as sugar. Of course, Charl knew who he was.

“The 86th seat, Walter— A fourth year from Italy.”

“Hmph. For a fourth year, you’d think he’d have a lower number.”

“In other words, he’s just small fry.”

“Charl. From your perspective, all nights until the 50th seat enters are just preliminaries, aren’t they?”

“That’s because the selection process is different.”

The number of entrants in the Night Party was a hundred. Test scores were used to calculate entry into it.

A standardised score was derived from calculating the average out of all subjects, so for a fourth year they would be judged based on a bird's eye view of their grades for the past four years.

In comparison, a first year had it relatively easy... because of the way the scores were calculated. As long as they had excellent grades for their first few tests, their standardised scores would rank them high enough to enter the Night Party.

In other words, battle ability wasn't taken into account.

To that point though, out of the hundred chosen, roughly half—the 49th seat and higher were ranked according to their combat potential. Of course, Magnus was number one.

Ultimately, anyone ranked 50th or worse were lacking in battle experience and were just placed there as cannon fodder. So for Charl and Loki to be placed in the Rounds, even though they were still sophomores, was quite a big deal.

So if you were skilled in battle, you wouldn't be ranked below the 50th seat.

Or at least, that was how it was supposed to be...

Charl's gaze fell onto Walter's automaton.

Just up till yesterday, Walter had been using a giant-type golem.

However, the puppet standing next to him now—it was a humanoid-type knight clad in full armour.

Was this an ace up his sleeve specifically for the Night Party?

There were a few who used this tactic. However, for someone to have conserved his trump card and yet still managed to make through the selection, which itself was pretty strict...

(Could this guy actually be ridiculously strong...?)

At that moment, the gallery began to stir with excitement, as a challenger's arrival was announced.

— Finally, she had arrived. She had chosen not to run, but fight!

With five Garm types in tow, the female student with the pearl white hair made her way towards the field.

With her conspicuous physique, she was riding on top a wolf dog with black fur.

Acknowledging Frey, Walter smiled.

“So, you’ve finally arrived, Signorina Frey.”

Frey alighted off Rabi, trotting into the field.

“Uu... Rabi, Riveria, Ruby, Revina, Robin. Let’s go.”

They barked in response. Without waiting to receive any command, they dispersed.

There was only one enemy. There was no reason not to use their numerical superiority. The dogs ran alongside the stone pillars that were lined up, beginning to surround their opponent.

It was the tactic behind Frey’s consecutive victories, the encirclement formation.

Her pearl white hair began to stand on end as she sent out a flare of magic energy. All the Garm types received Frey’s magic energy— then began to howl.

Their voices turned into a bullet of air, gouging the ground as it sped towards the automaton.

A grin surfaced on Walter’s face as he placed his hand on the knight’s shoulder.

Instantly, the knight escaped upwards. It could fly!

As if on cue, several shadows flew onto the field.

There were four of them. Flying smoothly, they glided through the air— were they automata!?

On each shadow, there was a student perched on its shoulder.

Appearing with their users, they were all knights clad in full armour.

They were the same design as Walter's automaton, and had the same abilities!

“Frey! It's an ambush!”

Charl instinctively shouted out, but the knights had already begun to move.

Allowing their masters to alight, each knight targeted a single Garm type.

It was five on five. But the difference was— Frey wouldn't be able to react to each one!

Being able to control multiple automata at the same time— while it was Frey's strength, it was also her weakness. Having to control multiple automata meant her focus was split. Controlling them would become difficult.

On the other hand, her opponents could focus solely on controlling one automaton. Furthermore, they had sprung a surprise attack that Frey was unprepared to deal with. The situation was no longer advantageous for her.

In desperation, Frey activated the Sonic circuit once more.

Each Garm howled, firing off another sonic bullet, aiming for each of the five knights.

(Splendidly done!)

She had aligned it in such a way that the puppeteers were in the line of fire. If the puppet dodged, the puppeteer would be grievously hurt.

As expected, the knights didn't dodge. They became the literal shield to protect their masters.

The sonic bullet hit. There was a resounding impact borne from the tremendous shockwave, and the ground itself shook.

However, the knights didn't even flinch one bit.

(They managed to endure... that attack?)

They were barely scratched. Sparkles of the dregs of magic energy used hung around in the air. Once she realised that the remnants of magic energy left weren't Frey's, Charl's knees began to tremble.

A large volume of magic energy engulfed the field. Sigmund spread his wings open in response.

(These things... aren't normal at all!)

The thread of magic energy binding the puppeteer and automaton was extremely thick. The surge in magic energy was overwhelming. It was so powerful for a moment Charl thought the puppet was the one releasing magic energy.

... Or maybe it really was the puppet?

Charl glanced over at the puppeteers. Checking her mental database, she matched the faces to what she knew about the participants.

“The one on the right is Ahmad— a third year from India. Then that's Rosso from Italy and Schiller from France. The other two are fourth years.”

“Their country of origins are all over the place. More importantly though, their automata are all the same model.”

“That's it! How did I not realise it earlier? That's extremely unnatural!”

Every one of them was an upper classman...

On top of that, each automaton they possessed were clearly the same design from a single series of automata.

(As I thought, these people are a team!)

While Charl was deep in thought, the battle had resumed.

Having endured the sonic bullet, the knights moved at the same time.

They vanished! No, that was wrong— they were simply too quick!

Their movements ignored inertia. Hitting their maximum speed without any need for accelerating, they charged towards their respective targets.

Having just discharged her magic energy, there was nothing Frey could have done.

The match was over in an instant. The five Garm types had their bodies or legs slashed at, and taking advantage of their subsequent flinching the knights pinned them onto the ground.

Walter's knight stomped on Rabi, placing his sword at Rabi's neck.

“Rabi—!”

“Stop, please.”

Frey dashed over without thinking, but Walter smiled as he delivered his warning for her to stop.

The tip of the blade dug into Rabi's neck, causing him to whine in pain.

“Honestly, a frontal assault would have been fine too, but you have a dormant power that's dangerous.”

Walter was probably referring to the night when Loki and Frey had clashed— Rabi had grown in size and rampaged about wildly.

“My personal belief is that any uncertain factors should be removed from the equation as much as possible, so now we've arrived at this conclusion. I hear you

treasure these dogs as family. If those rumours are true, surely you value their lives, no?”

With a smile of an angel, he delivered the words of a devil.

“Obediently hand over your gauntlet, please.”

Frey looked at Rabi, then around at the rest of the Garm types.

A deathly silence descended over the gallery.

After displaying such fury and power, was **Surround Roar** going to give up so easily just like that?

As they watched on with bated breath, Frey removed her glove, and held it out towards Walter.

Walter smiled, and just as he reached out for the glove—

A black shadow suddenly danced in mid-air.

As sharp as a bolt of lightning, it flew straight towards the field of battle. The shadow split into two whilst still in the air, each targeting a different knight.

With perfectly synchronised movements, the two knights were blown away.

Before the crowd could wonder what that was, this time something sliced the air from the opposite direction.

Flying in a straight line, it collided with a knight.

It was a large sword! The sword smashed into the knight, freeing the Great Dane.

The sword transformed into a humanoid shape— and at the same time eight short swords flew out into the air. Firing in rapid succession like bullets from a machine gun, they assailed a different knight, forcing it to retreat.

Finally, Frey snapped back to her senses. Channeling her magic energy,

“Rabi!”

With a howl, he unleashed a sonic bullet, aiming for Walter’s knight.

Walter’s reaction was lightning fast. He forced his automaton backwards, dodging the bullet.

With that, Rabi was no longer trapped. All the Garm types had been freed.

The gallery began to stir at the sudden turn of events. And at the point where their gazes were all directed—

“Hi there, 100th seat here.”

“My apologies for being late, I’m the 99th.”



Raishin,

wrapped up in bandages, and Loki, hobbling on his crutches.

Even though they were supposed to be excused from battle due to injuries, there they were, standing there with normal expressions on their faces.

It wasn't curiosity nor contempt nor admiration, but an odd cheer welled up in the gallery.

(That idiot! He's being reckless again...!)

The blood rushed to Charl's head. But at the same time, she couldn't help the warm feeling running through her chest.

Both of them were injured. They were clearly in no state to fight. Even so, they had come flying to rescue Frey from her predicament...!

In front of a moved Charl, Raishin and Loki exchanged glances,

“Don't copy me, you idiot!”

“You're the copycat you oriental idiot!”

They began to quarrel.

“The injured should just go back to the ward and sleep! Get the female students from the medical team to fawn over you!”

“You go back! And you just want to take advantage of the situation to get one of the girls to fall in love with you!”

“Love!? Don't spout such nonsense you supersonic idiot!” “Light-speed idiot!”
“Warp-speed idiot!”

They clashed with their faces close enough to almost touch each other.

At the moment they put strength into their bodies though, sharp pain ran through them. Raishin clutched his chest, while Loki clutched his sides, and the both of them were hunched over as they groaned in pain from the sudden exertion.

“... Just what are they doing...?”

Charl’s dumbfounded voice echoed across the twilight covered field in vain.

(4)

His ribs hurt.

The impact of landing sent shockwaves of pain through him, and his pulse started to race. His collarbone, which had been healing, sent him a reminder that it was still in bad shape after that kick he unleashed.

Cold sweat dripping off his body, he glanced around the field.

Next to him, Loki had also broken out in cold sweat. It seemed like he was no better than Raishin. Even though his leg was in terrible condition, he had leapt off Cherubim in mid-flight. Quite frankly, he was an idiot.

But— they had made it in time.

Frey was safe. The Garm types had a few scratches, but were alright nonetheless.

The enemy group didn’t huddle together, but neither were they spread apart. They stood several metres away from each other. Presumably, this was their formation. Truly a disciplined group.

Raishin could sense the strong magic energy from earlier.

These five people were strong. Absurdly so, given their rank. Also, their automata were top-notch.

But there was no need to be afraid. Loki was also someone whose strength belied their rank, and Yaya was the world’s top class automaton.

“Oh dear, an ambush? How sneaky~ I didn’t hear anything about this happening.”

The androgynous youth— Walter was his name— let out a playful laugh.

In contrast to his expression, he was filled with caution. He didn't attempt to make the first move.

There was a long stand-off as both sides stared down each other. Their spirits clashed, and finally repelling the silence, Walter shouted at the other members who had taken a few steps back.

“Don't falter! Our opponents are injured, and we have the numerical advantage!”

At Walter exhortation, the other members seemed to regain their composure.

Floating up into the air with a woosh, they began to swap places, changing their formation.

“... Hey, **Second Last**.”

“Yeah.”

Raishin nodded as Loki muttered. He didn't have to finish his sentence. They both recognised the movements—

It was the same as the butler, Shin, who they fought before.

If they had to guess, these lot probably had similar— if not the exact same— magic circuits that Shin had!

In that case... was it possible that there was a human being under that armour, much like Shin?

It was a repulsive thought. Killing off any unwanted emotions, Raishin softly whispered to Yaya.

“Don't get sloppy. These people are familiar with combat.”

“Right!”

Yaya answered him. She still had tear stains which were pitiful to look at, but at least her voice and attitude were back to normal.

In any case, this group looked like it was organised around the basis of group combat.

There were five of them right now. However, he couldn't discard the possibility that they might be more lying in wait.

“How do you want to do this, your highness? There are five of them, but the potential sabotage unit could be as many as thirteen, you know?”

“If you're afraid, just sit back and watch from the sides.”

“Who's afraid!?”

“Hmph... That's why you're called **Second Last**.”

“Are you trying to start a fight here you idiot!?”

“You're the idiot, you unicellular idiot. Even if they had more people waiting to ambush us— all we have to do is deny them the opportunity to attack while brushing them aside.”

“And that's why you're a multicellular idiot. We're just a hastily improvised team, while they have a complete formation. No matter how you think about they have the advantage.”

“You are a sad multicellular idiot that has ruptured. — Just who do you think I am?”

Throwing away his crutches, he extended his hand out, magic energy flowing into Cherubum.

The Jet magic circuit activated. The parts on Cherubim's back began to whirl, and the thorn-like short swords ejected out. Four of them split up, and flew off in four directions.

Their targets were the four knights on both flanks.

For a brief moment, the knights were at a loss over whether to defend, or evade.

In the end they chose to evade. It seemed like they were wary of the offensive power of the Jet circuit.

The short swords changed direction instantly, chasing after them.

A game of cat and mouse began. Having to focus solely on evading, the four automata lost any openings to attack.

Loki had completely sealed off four units. And he did it just with four swords!

Cherubim had eight in total. Even if the enemy number were to increase, he'd still be able to handle them.

(This guy really is a monster...!)

Such fearsome magic energy. Raishin clicked his tongue, while Cherubim kicked off the ground. Using the Jet circuit's propulsion to fly into the air, it headed straight for the knight— Walter's automaton.

With the blades on both arms, it attacked Walter's automaton used its shield to block— but it was futile. The shield was sliced apart as easily as it was made of cotton.

The automaton narrowly dodged the blow. Cherubim checked itself, then began the pursuit.

Just like that, Loki had effortlessly smashed apart the formation of the five knights.

At this point, Raishin finally understood Loki's intentions.

(While they're all focused on him... I see. So that's how it is.)

Abruptly, he noticed Frey trembling with anxiety behind them.

While hugging onto the five dogs, she was staring at Loki's fight with a worried expression.

“Don’t worry, Frey.”

Raishin began to charge magic energy, while smiling at her.

“Me aside— I can’t imagine how Loki’s ever going to lose.”

“Raishin...”

“Yaya. You ready?”

He checked up on his partner. Yaya lips were pressed together, and she silently nodded.

If Yaya and the two of them began to build up power, waiting for their chance.

The scuffle was going on mainly in the centre of the field. Suddenly, an automaton jumped out. One of the short swords had grazed it, cutting its helmet, and to evade further damage it had leapt backwards.

Now was the time!

“Suimei Shijuuhachishou!”

Yaya charged forward explosively. In an instant Yaya reached where the automaton was, releasing a kick to its back.

It was a clean hit. There was a visible dent in the armour, but it didn’t break.

It was a clash of two forces. There was resistance, just like there was with Shin. However—

“Tenken!”

The moment he changed the nature of the magic energy, there was a audible crack as the knight automata’s spine gave way.

(— It worked!)

While their magic circuits resembled Shin's, and their puppeteers had equivalent magic energy, their combat potential was nowhere near Shin, just as Raishin suspected.

The knight crashed onto the ground, a red fluid seeping out from under its helmet. Raishin was suddenly overcome with a wave of nausea. Aware that an opening had suddenly presented itself, a knight charged towards Yaya, who was supporting Raishin like a crutch.

A large battle-axe came swinging over. Raishin hurriedly channelled magic energy, ordering Yaya to defend.

Her thin arms bore the brunt of the blow... but there was insufficient magic energy, and her skin was sliced open.

It became a test of strength.

Yaya's Kongouriki was strong, but it seemed their opponent also possessed a strange herculean strength of its own.

Evading one of Cherubim's short swords, another automaton came charging over. It looked like he was trying to assault her rear.

At this rate, she was going to be trapped in a pincer!

In an instant, with a fierce roar, a large sword cleft the battle-axe wielding knight in twain.

A large volume of blood spurted out. Amidst the yell of the puppeteer and the screams of the audience, the rain of blood fell onto Yaya, dying her white skin a dark shade of crimson.

"Hmph... You're so naïve."

Behind Raishin, Loki coldly remarked.

"If you don't have the stomach for battle, step aside. You'll only get in the way."

Had he been seen through with just one moment of discomposure?

How embarrassing. Raishin ground his teeth in frustration.

“Yaya, Suimei Sanjuurokushou!”

“Roger!”

Yaya jumped up with blinding speed. The knight approaching her from behind lost sight of her, and was bewildered.

Yaya rotated in the air above its head one, dropping her heel onto it. The automaton just managed to intercept her kick, but because of that it stopped moving.

A transformed Cherubim charged towards that opening, swift as a gale, bisecting the automaton at the waist.

“... Hmph. Can you still fight?”

“It’s just like you said, Loki. I was naïve. But I will not be like that ever again.”

Up till now, Raishin had killed puppets.

No matter how human like the opponent’s automata were now, it was no reason for him to hesitate.

Nothing good ever came out of hesitating!

Swatting away Cherubim’s short swords, two knight automata came charging towards them, brandishing their swords. However, Yaya easily blocked both.

“Yaya! Tenken Sanjuurokushou!”

He gave a further command. Continuing to push back, the automata’s weapons were sent flying from their grasp.

And then, she planted a kick with all her might into their exposed torsos.

There was two dull thuds. The knights were automata were sent flying left and right.

On one side, Cherubim was there—

On the other, Yaya had sprinted over—

Continuing to press the attack, they caught the automata in mid-air. Cherubim slash severed the head from one, Yaya's feet left a gaping hole in the body of the other.

“D-don't falter! We can still withstand this!”

Walter shouted at his own knight. However, his voice rang hollow.

It wasn't a matter of faltering or not faltering anymore.

Now that it was a two on one situation, the battle was effectively over.

Yaya and Cherubim charged toward's Walter's knight, trapping it in a pincer attack.

Walter was lost over which to avoid.

Ultimately though, no matter which one he avoided, it would still be meaningless.

Yaya's kick crushed its head, while Cherubim's blades sliced its torso apart.

All too easily, the five knights had fallen.

Their magic circuits continued to activate on their own. They were in terrible condition, their bodies were effectively in pieces—like ashes— scattered and strewn all over the place.

The five puppeteers were in disbelief, staring at the sight that unfolded before them.

Yaya and Cherubim were both coated in a thick layer of blood as they turned to face them.

Even though they didn't mean to intimidate the five, the puppeteers still took a step back.

Of course, escape was out of the question. If a puppeteer had his puppet broken on the field of battle and fled, the judges would announce it as a forfeit."

Their shoulders trembled with mortification as they removed their gloves and threw it at their feet.

In that moment, it was Raishin and company's victory.

"The 86th, 85th, 84th, 83rd, and 82nd seat— have dropped out."

Having their loss announced, the five of them dejectedly left the field. Watching them leave, Raishin let out a sigh of relief.

While remaining on alert, Yaya came up to him, worried.

"Are you ok, Raishin?"

"Yeah... now then."

He looked and Loki and Frey. Frey flinched in surprise, stiffening like she had remembered something.

"The two of you, how do you want to proceed now?"

"Hmph... What do *you* want to do?"

"Let's see. There's a possibility that they still have people lying in ambush— if I were to go up against the two of you now, I don't like my odds."

"What a coincidence. I don't want to fight while something is holding me back either."

Frey's eyes widened as she heard Loki's words.

Hugging onto her dogs, she looked up at her younger brother with a flushed face.

"Loki... You mean...?"

"... Teaming up with you is the advantageous thing to do in the Night Party."

Holding him back and advantageous were contradictory, but Loki either didn't notice or didn't care as he spoke to his elder sister.

Hearing his declaration, the gallery started to buzz.

"Did you hear that?!" "The Sword Emperor forming a team with Frey!" "A sibling combination!?"

The Sword Emperor alone was dangerous, but if the five Garm types were behind him as support, it could be said that they were as powerful as an army. If he wasn't careful, then they would be as dangerous as the Marshall.

A chill running down his spine, Raishin chuckled and withdrew.

Loki and Frey followed. They both retreated to opposite ends of the field.

Staring at each other, they waited for an hour to pass.

Having fulfilled the time obligations, this evening's Night Party ended just before eight.

Firstly, Loki and Frey left the field.

After acknowledging they had left, Raishin retreated with Yaya in tow.

After confirming the three people left the field, the executive committee announced the end of the proceedings for the day.

Without turning to acknowledge each other, Loki and Raishin avoided the gallery, heading for their respective dormitories.

After stumbling through twenty steps, Raishin pitched forward, falling down on his face.

Along with most of that fight being a bluff—he really hadn't been in any condition to fight.

(5)

Weakly opening his eyes, he realised he was inside a room that reeked of medicine.

“Raishin! You're awake!?”

Yaya's face came flying into his field of vision. Her jet black eyes were swimming with tears, large drops of which came falling off her face.

“I'm so glad... Raishin...!”

“... Sorry. I made you worry again.”

He looked around. The walls and ceilings were familiar. As he thought, or rather sure enough, he was inside the ward located on the first floor next to the doctor's office.

He searched through his hazy memories. If he remembered correctly, after the battle—

That's right, he had collapsed.

He had overexerted his grievously hurt body. Unable to endure the burden of channelling magic energy, he had ended up passing out.

He chuckled wryly. Even if he said so himself, it was as if he hadn't learnt anything.

His chest hurt, like his wounds had reopened. Glancing down, he saw fresh bandages wrapped around it, which meant Cruel had probably attended to him.

Next to him, Loki was silently sleeping. Frey was sprawled by his side, her pearl white hair spread on the bed.

Cold drops of something hit his face suddenly, causing Raishin to turn back.

“I’m sorry... Raishin... Even though... Even though Yaya was with you...!”

Her eyebrows twisted as she covered her face and cried. Raishin was shocked.

“Don’t cry. You didn’t do anything wrong. It was because I tried to be cool and did that flying kick earlier. It’s not your fault.”

“No... It’s because of Yaya...”

Yaya was being more obstinate than usual. She sniffled, coughed, and hiccupped.

“... You’re behaving a little strange. Did something happen?”

“Nothing... Nothing happened...!”

“There’s no way nothing happened. Not with that face you’re making.”

He stretched out his hand towards her without thinking. Just as he brushed her shoulder, Yaya flinched in surprise and recoiled away from him.

“Ah... I’m s-sorry.”

Yaya seemed surprised at herself. Raishin was surprised as well. Normally Yaya would take the chance to get closer, but now she quivered at his touch.

Raishin pretended he didn’t notice it.

“Did you bring me here? What time is it now?”

“Ah... I’m not sure... I’ll g-go check the time.”

Yaya stood up, silently walking out so as to not wake the sleeping Frey.

Her footsteps seemed to get heavier and firmer as she walked on— or was that just his imagination?

Stopping at the doorframe, she turned back to face Raishin.

Her beauty caused his to hold his breath momentarily.

Her figure was like that of an ephemeral bloom of a modest daffodil.

Yaya cast her eyes downwards, giving him a lonely smile.

“Goodbye, Raishin.”

“Huh—?”

The next instant, it was a complete change as she smiled brightly like she always did.

“I’ll be back after checking the time!”

“Ah... Yeah, ok.”

She dashed off, her footsteps slowly fading into the distance.

Seeing her figure from behind, she looked like she always did.

That night, just like that, Yaya didn’t return.

Chapter 2 – die Kreuzritter

(1)

It was early morning. The darkness of night was already beginning to disappear, and the birds were chirping away noisily.

Dawn was close. Having not slept a wink the previous night, now that it was already this time of the day, Raishin decided to act. Leaving Frey and Loki, he exited the ward.

Walking rapidly he reached the deserted lobby, trying to keep his impatience in check as he reached for the phone.

“Hello... Who is this...?”

Perhaps she had been woken by the call, because a surprisingly drowsy Irori answered.

“I’m sorry for calling so early, but put me through to Shouko!”

“Eh... Raishin?”

“Yaya didn’t return! Something might have happened—“

“Didn’t return...? So in other words...”

“I don’t know where she is! Now hurry and put Shouko on the line!”

“Calm down Raishin! C-calm down! First we have to phone Shouko to tell her!”

“Yup. In any case, you need to calm down too.”

Raishin heard various crashing sounds on the other end that sounded like someone had tripped over several things.

After a while, Shouko’s voice could be heard.

“In a pinch again, boy?”

“I’m sorry... But this time it’s a little different.”

“I heard. Yaya’s gone missing?”

“... It’s my fault. She was acting weird yesterday. I should have—“

“You can beat yourself up later. We’ll search for her on our end too—“

At that moment, Raishin heard “Mistresssss!” in the far off distance.

Something had happened. Raishin’s palms grew slick with sweat, but Shouko’s voice was emotionless.

“Something troublesome has cropped up. I have to go.”

“Eh!? Wait!”

“Don’t be spoilt.”

A flat refusal. Maybe she was still mad that he had defied her orders the previous time.

“Go back to bed, boy. I’ll contact you later in the evening.”

The one sided conversation ended. Raishin was filled with unease as he replaced the receiver.

He couldn’t just sit still. Fighting the impulse to run out, he stopped to think.

Searching recklessly wouldn’t guarantee that he would find Yaya.

In the first place, where did she go? Had he hurt her in some way?

Or, had someone— kidnapped her!?

Yaya was a top class puppet created under the Karyuusai brand. Her value, her abilities, were already well known to the surrounding people, and there were many students in the academy sponsored by the major powers of the world. Could some country have instigated any of their protégés to forcibly steal her?

But the academy wouldn’t forgive that. In the first place, Yaya’s abilities made kidnapping her by force impossible.

(The academy— That’s right, could I appeal to the academy to deal with this theft?)

... No. For some reason, he felt like discussing it with the headmaster would be... a bad idea.

(I need someone I can trust— Professor Kimberly!)

He made a snap decision. Hurriedly heading off in the direction of the Machine Physics department, he collided with someone.

There was a cute cry of pain. Silky silver hair had crashed into Raishin’s chest.

“Good morning, Raishin.”

Rubbing her nose, a female student smiled brightly at him.

She had nice features. She was pretty with slit eyes and a shapely nose. Her eyes sparkled like emeralds, and her long silver hair was like a cloak, glittering in the wind.

Raishin’s instincts screamed at him to be on his guard.

She was beautiful. But he hadn’t sensed her presence at all. Even with his level of sensitivity!

“... Who are you?”

“How disappointing. You don’t remember me at all? Even though we’re in the same class.”

“... Sorry. I don’t have the luxury of getting to know people.”

As a matter of habit, Raishin didn’t have the time to be interested in other students.

And right now, he didn’t have the time to be standing around chatting.

Raishin backed away without letting his guard down, putting distance between him and the girl. She continued, undeterred.

“I don’t see your automaton nearby. Could it be you’re searching for her?”

“Her name is Yaya.”

“My apologies. Then do you have any idea where your pup—Yaya has disappeared to?”

“No. So I don’t have time to talk to you now.”

“But I do have an idea.”

His wariness levels jumped. Did she just say what he thought she said?

“Where!? How do you know!? Who are you!?”

“Please calm down. I’m not absolutely certain... but just earlier I was taking a stroll by the lake, and I saw a kimono clad girl, so I thought it might be her.”

It was a lie. His intuition was screaming so loudly could he could hear it. She was lying!

Who was this girl? Was she... the one who had used Charl previously?

This was dangerous. Raishin didn’t have his partner now. And he was badly injured.

But— It was an extremely good opportunity.

If she was the one pulling the strings, then he would be able to get to the truth faster.

Raishin fought his instincts, recklessly answering the girl.

“Lead the way.”

(2)

The refreshing light of the morning sun shone down on the white walls.

It was early morning in the Gryphon dormitory. Almost all the students were still in bed.

“Idiot... You really are a towering idiot...!”

On top of a double sized bed, Charl was mumbling something in her sleep.

“Idiot... I won’t forgive you if you... Aaahn... I said you couldn’t... <3”

In contrast to her words, Charl was hugging tightly onto her pillow, when her eyes suddenly snapped open.

For a moment, she was still half-asleep. Then suddenly, she blushed furiously.

Cringing in embarrassment, she started beating her pillow furiously. Sigmund, who was at the foot of her pillow, was woken up, and he let out a yawn.

Next to her, Henri sat up while rubbing her eyes.

“Sis...? What’s wrong?”

“N-n-n-nothing’s wrong! Everything’s perfectly normal!”

“You needn’t concern yourself, Henri. Charl just had an embarrassing dream.”

“B q-q-quiet Sigmund! I’ll change your lunch to eggshells!”

Looking at Henri giggling, Charl felt a sense of bliss.

Henri’s name had already been struck off the school’s register, but thanks to Kimberly intercession she had been allowed to continue living in the Gryphon dormitory.

She hadn’t expected the day that the both of them could wake up together would come so soon...

At that moment, there was a sound of something knocking on her window.

She wondered if some birds had landed on her sill, but when she looked over to the window— her heart skipped a beat.

Opening the window, Raishin stuck his face inside.

Her dream replayed itself in her mind, and her head began to boil.

“Yo, Charl. You’re up early.”

“W-w-what are you doing you insolent creature! How dare you enter a lady’s room without asking!?”

His partner would sure be unable to stay silent over something as daring as this— or so she thought.

“... What happened to her? It’s strange to see you alone. Do you want something?”

“Ah yeah, actually— I came to ask you out on a date.”

“Are you an idiot!?”

She shouted back at him. Of course, she had turned red from the tip of her ears to the base of her neck.

“I-i-in any case go down and wait for me! Get lost you insolent cad! Pervert!”

Raishin chuckled, giving Henri and Sigmund a glance, before hopping off the window sill.

He leapt onto a tree branch opposite her window, before scampering down. It was as if he was a monkey.

Charl hurriedly stripped off her negligee, changing as fast as possible.

“Sis? Just now, Raishin...?”

“Henri. You change too. Hurry up and get to Professfor Kimberly this instant.”

“Eh...?”

“Go straight to her office. Don’t take any detours. No matter who you run into, don’t follow them. Head straight for the office. Clear?”

“Y-yes...”

Henri was puzzled, but she obediently followed her sister’s words. Washing her face, she changed into her apron dress.

Waiting for Sigmund to land on her cap, Charl left the room together with Henri.

They headed for the entrance. The boarding mistress wasn’t there yet. Heading past the security office, they went outside. After making sure Henri made her way to the Machine Physics department, she re-entered the dormitory by the back entrance, and headed over to the spot below her window.

Just like she had told him to, Raishin was waiting there.

“So, what did you want?”

Raishin quickly lost the cheerfulness he had had earlier, a serious look forming on his face.

“The truth is... Yaya’s gone missing. I’m sorry, but can you help me look for her together?”

Charl gave a small snort of laughter.

“... Charl?”

“Since you went out of your way to come here—”

The tree behind him grew noisy with activity. The branches shook and the leaves rustled. The wind... No. It was Charl’s magic energy causing the disturbance!

“I’ll pay you back for earlier!”

She released her magic energy. Sigmund was shrouded in indeterminate darkness, growing larger in size. However, when he emerged from the darkness he wasn't a giant dragon. Instead, he was roughly the size of a horse.

His muscles grew taut, and his appearance was angular like a bird of prey.

“Hey... Wait, Charl! What are you—“

“Lustre Saber!”

She didn't bother to reply. Sigmund's jaw opened. A straight torrent of light gushed forth.

It grew like a comet, targeting Raishin.

Raishin lightly jumped back with a speed that wasn't human. He performed a back flip, moving himself out of the line of fire. However, Sigmund's light chased after him.

It was really like a blade of light. Unable to avoid it, he had no choice but to smash it with his hand. His skin was burnt and peeled off. Under the broken skin though, his hand appeared to be strangely unhurt!

Raishin landed with a thud. A heat haze shimmered around his body, causing his visage to grow hazy.

“Hmph. Enough already, just show me your true form. Having to look at that face is very irritating.”

Raishin gave an eerie grin. The next instant, sparks flew off as his figure completely crumbled away. Pieces of his hair, clothes and skin fell away, revealing an entirely different person underneath.

He was taller than Raishin, and more slender. His hair was slicked back, and behind his tinted glasses he had a distinctive gaze as sharp as a sword.

It was the man who had called himself a Machine Doll— Shin!

“Well, this is interesting. How did you know? While I am not completely perfect, that was a rather good impression, if I do say so myself.”

“He might be dull, insensitive, unable to understand a girl’s heart in the slightest, and a helpless idiot— but he’s not the type of guy who would invite me only without even so much as saying hi to Henri.”

“I see. As expected of the Oriental Don Juan. He’s managed to seduce both sisters completely. It’s a sister sandwich.”

“... What’s that?”

Shin smoothed his bangs back, giving a sharp gaze at Sigmund.

“... Your appearance has changed slightly since we last met.”

“It’s not just his appearance. Lustre Saber!”

At Charl’s command, Sigmund fired off another burst of light.

It was the focused blade of light. Shin jumped into the air and tried to flee— but there was no shaking it off!

While it was as strong as the Lustre Cannon, in exchange for losing power it gained duration. The blade didn’t vanish, continuing to chase after Shin.

Shin gave up evading, and just like earlier, used his bare hand to hit the light away.

As his face grimaced in pain, he kicked off in mid-air.

Reaching maximum speed in an instant, he charged at Sigmund, aiming a sharp kick at him.

Sigmund lightly stepped to the side, dodging the kick.

Shin was shocked. His kick hadn’t landed!

Getting worked up, he increased his speed again, but in that instant, Sigmund had swung his head over in Shin's direction.

“Lustre Flare!”

A rain of light descended. Countless needles of light dispersed in his direction, falling upon him.

Even with his high speed, the spread of projectiles was such that he couldn't escape. Pierced by the needles, holes appeared in his clothing. He appeared to have used some countermeasures, because his magic energy decreased heavily.

“... Well done. It's almost as if you're a different person now.”

“Hmph. Did you think I would keep on losing?”

Assessing the reasons for her defeat, she had refined her tactics.

The result was a completely new way of utilising the Gram magic circuit.

Trading off endurance for agility, she hit upon the idea of not just recklessly increasing Sigmund's size.

This was all for the sake of defeating Shin and protecting Henri!

“... I see. It looks like the odds have shifted. I may be skilled at being the butler of the Bernstein family, but I dislike putting in effort. I won't fight a battle where the chances of victory are only half.”

Brushing off sand from his suit, he escaped into the air.

“I'm not letting you get away!”

Charl climbed up onto Sigmund's back, taking flight.

(3)

“Here Loki... Drink your milk.”

“I can manage it on my own.”

“Here, I peeled the eggshell off for you.”

“Stop that. Stop treating me like a child!”

It was morning in the ward. Loki was eating breakfast, and Frey was looking after him.

Even though she was being treated coldly, Frey was still happy. She was satisfied that she was doing things a proper elder sister should do. On the other hand, Loki bit viciously into his bread, a grumpy expression on his face.

Next to them, a giant sword was leaning against the wall—Cherubim was staring at them with apparent interest, while the five dogs were watching them in the seated position.

A bright smile, a peaceful scene. All that was quickly shattered.

“You guys!”

Raishin came bursting into the ward.

Was he hurt? His face was contorted and he was holding his sides.

Frey was surprised and tried to stand, but she trod on her own muffler and tumbled over.

“Uu... Raishin, what’s wrong?”

“Hmph... I was wondering why I hadn’t seen you since this morning.”

Raishin looked like he was at his wits end, his voice full of vigour.

“Yaya, she— My automaton’s gone missing!”

Instantly, tension ran through Loki and Frey.

“I couldn’t find her on my own. Please, help me!”

Frey and Loki exchanged glances, nodding at each other.

Loki moved the tray with his half eaten breakfast away, getting up on his feet.

“I understand. Cherubim, let’s go.”

[I’m ready]

Cherubim came flying off the wall, hovering in mid-air.

Spinning in the air once, its blade grew cloaked in fire as it swung down on Raishin!

There was a dull clang as something protected Raishin.

It was something thick— a shield. A huge tower shield had flown out from behind Raishin, stopping Cherubim’s destructive power completely.

The one bearing the shield was a small-sized automaton.

Wearing knightly armour and looking like a crusader, it had an apron with a cross etched onto it.

“... Was I a little too careless?”

Raishin emotionlessly muttered. It was clear this was not the normal Raishin. Raishin wasn’t this bloodthirsty. The Garm types began to growl, baring their fangs.

“How did you figure it out, Sword Emperor? This deception should have been perfect.”

“You fool. There’s no way he would ever ask me for help.”

“Oh? And what about you?”

“Uu... Raishin—“

Frey’s eyebrows were raised, and she had an angry look on her face.

“— would never refer to Yaya as ‘my automaton’.”

“I see... It appears that you love the Oriental more dearly than thought.”

“Who would love him!?”

His boiling point exceeded in an instant, Loki channelled his magic energy. The large blade reconfigured its parts, assuming a more humanoid form. In this form, it used the blades on both arms to slash at the fake.

The knight used its tower shield to block. Of course, that was Loki’s plan. Activating the Jet circuit, he attempted to melt through the shield.

It was a clash of strength. The blast of hot air scorched the door, filling the surrounding atmosphere with heat.

However, he couldn’t cut through it. The tower shield was able to resist that level of heat. Cherubim’s blade began to distort, the cutting edge getting damaged.

Finally, the figure of Raishin hiding behind the tower shield crumbled away.

Sparks flew as his true form emerged. Honey coloured hair hanging down, it was a handsome youth with a shapely figure.

“You... Rosenberg!?”

“It would be careless to fight here, Sword Emperor. For the both of us. Therefore— chase after me if you dare!”

At Rosenberg’s shout, the knight swung its tower shield upwards.

Cherubim leapt backwards, opening a line of retreat. Rosenberg clung onto the knight’s shoulder, his weight seemingly inconsequential to the knight as it took flight easily.

Cutting in front of Loki, they fled through the open window.

Loki jumped up from his bed, shaking Frey who was still seeing stars on the floor.

“... Something’s happened to that Oriental idiot. We’re going after him!”

(4)

Following the silver haired girl, Raishin was walking in the middle of a bunch of trees.

The path, if it could be called a path, was a suspicious animal trail. He was surrounded by virgin forest at this point. Lizards ran along the floor of the thick and untamed forest, while birds flitted and insects squirmed about.

“Did you really see Yaya around here?”

“Yes.”

The silver haired girl— Alice Bernstein lightly laughed as she nodded. She was definitely suspicious. Furthermore, she made no attempt to hide her suspiciousness. Raishin couldn’t read her at all.

“I last saw Yaya around here. I think it would be faster if we split up here to look for her.”

“... Are you helping me to search as well?”

“I believe your culture has a saying about how an embarked ship cannot turn back? Since I’ve come all the way, I might as well help.”

He couldn’t feel any malice emanating from her— which only made her smile more fearsome.

However, even if she did have ill intentions, Raishin was already inside her trap anyway. It was too late to start putting up resistance now. Raishin prepared himself for the worst, splitting up with Alice and proceeding deeper along the animal trail.

Unexpectedly, the trees opened up, revealing a clearing.

Yaya was there.

Her back was turned to him, and she was sitting on a stump. Her kimono was loose, exposing her shoulders. Her hair hung down, looking like it was water dripping down a surface. A small bird was on her finger, and she looked like she was in a conversation with it.

Raishin's presence caused the bird to flee. Yaya turned, finally realising he was standing there.

"Raishin...!"

"I've been looking for you, Yaya."

"Don't come any closer!"

Yaya's face was grim. Was she angry...? No, that wasn't it. Yaya looked like she was suffering, forcing herself to do something unpleasant as she stared at Raishin's face.

Raishin tried his best to look as gentle as possible, mustering his best smile.

"I'm glad you're unharmed. I was pretty worried, you know?"

"... Raishin was only worried about Yaya because Yaya is necessary for the Night Party, right?"

"No. It's because you're my partner. There isn't any reason needed for worrying about my partner."

Hearing his words, Yaya's expression crumbled. Her black eyes grew moist.

"But, Yaya is an automaton..."

"I don't care how you were born. To me, you're unmistakably human. People can say all the stupid things they want, I'll just ignore them."

Yaya rubbed her eyes, giving a small smile.

“Thank you. Yaya is... happy to hear that.”

“I don’t need your thanks. Let’s just go back.”

“... I cannot do that.”

“Yaya!”

“I can’t!”

“Why not!?”

Yaya continued while sobbing.

“Because... Yaya... Yaya will... cause Raishin to be lacking...!”

“To be lacking...?”

“Yaya—!”

Before she could continue, there was the sound of someone clapping.

A shadow appeared out of nowhere.

With silky silver hair, and a smile of enjoyment on her face, it was none other than Alice.

“My, my. What a beautiful scene. Even I got moved, and that’s very unlike me.”

Her tone was different from earlier. There was a different air about her, making her seem like a completely different person.

The look in her eyes was one of that who craved destruction. Raishin remembered that look of utter nihilism.

“The puppeteer loves the puppet as a human, but the puppet doesn’t think it’s good enough for the puppeteer and runs away— Never in a million years would you find a mesh of such conflicting emotions in the academy.”

“... So, you really were the instigator. What did you say to her?!”

“Nothing, really. I just informed her of something.”

“You informed her...?”

“That’s exactly right. And now she won’t return. Because she’s no longer qualified to.”

She raised her hand. As if that were a signal, the surrounding scenery crumbled away. What he had thought were trees turned into humans.

Appearing one after another, they were all students. In addition, there were armour wearing knights as well.

With each knight in tow, all the students who had appeared were all wearing white gloves.

“Eh...!?”

Yaya was surprised as well. It looked like she knew nothing of this too.

Alice smiled at a stunned Yaya.

“Thank you for being the bait, Yaya. Thanks to you Raishin was focused solely on you— it was child’s play to surround him like this.”

Raishin quickly counted the number of enemies. Including Alice there were eight students, but seven automata.

He didn’t recognise any of the students’ faces. They were probably all upper classmen. There were a pair of twins giggling. There was a red headed youth with a sour look on his face. There was a brown-skinned youth, and a young person that looked like a priest...

The knights were all spaced at equal intervals, completely encircling him.

“Now then, since there’s no place for you to escape,”

Alice’s lips twisted elegantly into a beautiful smile.

“Won’t you consider joining us, Raishin?”

(5)

His skin was assaulted with a tingling sensation.

It was caused by the saturation of magic energy in the air around him; their attacking intent.

Raishin’s brain went into full overdrive, thinking of ways to escape.

If he exerted forced control over Yaya, he was... sure he would be able to make her fight.

But even if he did so, could he manage to fight off this number of opponents?

He didn’t know what Alice’s goal was, but right now, all he could do was to follow along with her wishes...

At that moment, there was a surge of light overhead.

“Is that the Lustre Cannon!?”

He snapped his head upwards, looking to the sky. Dodging the blast of light, someone came landing down—it was Shin!

Chasing after Shin, Sigmund, who was roughly the size of a horse, came swooping down.

It was a form he had never seen before. His smart silhouette looked extremely agile. Charl was seated in between his four wings.

“You’re the worst kind of idiot! Are you lacking brains! How can you have no sense of danger you herbivore!”

She yelled at him. Not giving Raishin any chance to reply, Sigmund released another torrent of light.

The stream of light swept the area around Raishin. The knights all jumped out of the way to avoid it.

“My deepest apologies, my lady. I was seen through easily.”

Shin covered Alice from the blast, talking to her reverently.

“Mister Akabane is a straight and true man down to the bottom of his heart... With a spirit as twisted as my lady’s, reproducing something like that is impossible.”

“Ok, Shin. I’ll make it such that you’ll never be able to cry or laugh again later.”

At that moment, a small sized automaton came flying in, with a golden haired clinging onto it.

Seeing his face, Charl let out a cry of surprise.

“**Rosa Adamant**— Rosenberg!”

Without any hesitation, he landed directly next to Yaya, in the middle of the students. Alice good naturedly spoke to this handsome, well-built youth.

“Oh, did you fail as well, Rosenberg?”

“My apologies. They saw through it easily.”

“Dear, dear... **Second Last** is far more popular than I’d thought. However, at least the plan to lure him here was a success.”

Her eyes suddenly narrowed. A few moments later, Raishin sensed someone else's magic energy. It felt familiar, and it was coming from behind him. Someone had chased after Rosenberg.

Before long, those two arrived.

Frey was riding on top of Rabi with the other Garm types following, while Loki was standing on top of his large sword.

Frey was surprised to see Raishin and Charl.

“Uu... Raishin... and Charl.”

“Save the talk for later. Focus on the enemy.”

Loki spoke curtly. He was right, they couldn't afford to chit-chat in this scenario.

Alice smiled, nodding in satisfaction.

“Essentially, this is four against nine. We'll surely be able to emerge victorious, right Rosenberg?”

“Don't get too overconfident. Even if we factored thou into the equation, it's no more than an eight-five percent chance of victory.”

Raishin turned to look at him.

His tone of voice had been neither bluff nor exaggeration nor a show of courage.

With Loki and the rest's arrival, the encirclement had been broken. Escape was possible. In terms of combat strength, they had Sigmund, Cherubim and the five Garm types.

Frankly speaking, that was quite a strong line up on their side. Ordinary puppeteers wouldn't stand a chance. Considering last night's battle, when Loki had single-handedly suppressed all the knights—

The worst case scenario raced through his mind as Raishin steeled himself for a fight.

If these knights were on the same level as the knights from last night, they would win.

However what if— these knights were on the same level as Shin?

“... Who are you people?”

He wasn't expecting an answer, but Rosenberg candidly replied.

“We are the *Kreuzritter*. We are the ones who will rule this Night Party.”

“Heh... That's quite the big statement you're making.”

As he thought, this guy was filled with self-confidence.

Behind him, the remaining students were all the same. Even though they were facing the Sword Emperor and the T-Rex, they were all in no doubt that they had the upper hand!

“... Whatever, I don't care what you guys are. Rule the Night Party all you want. However, you better give Yaya back now.”

“She is thine no longer.”

“Don't screw with me! Do you think I'll just let that slide!? Yaya, come back here!”

However, Yaya turned her face away, and the strangest thing happened. She hid behind Alice's back.

Raishin was shocked. Rosenberg spoke with the self-assured air of royalty.

“I watched your battle the previous evening. It was careless of you to enter the field of battle with those injuries— but your performance was splendid. They may have been sacrificial pawns, but you still destroyed five of them.”

“Sacrificial pawns, you said?”

Loki reacted to that last statement.

“It’s true, last night’s trash possessed less than half of this lot’s potential power.”

Raishin couldn’t believe his ears. Half...?

—Half!?

“Every puppet here is the finished article. Last night, they sacrificed the defective ones to gauge our strength.”

Finished article. That phrased echoed inside his head, causing Raishin to mutter without thinking,

“In that case, all of them are just like Shin...”

Deus Machina— Machine Doll.

“In our country, we call them *Maschinensoldat*.”

Alice added on. Charl and Frey gasped. They were German!

Counting Shin, there were nine of them. And all had their puppeteers on hand.

Just by himself, Shin had already given them such a tough fight...!

“The time for conversation is past. Let’s get them, *Herr*.”

The youth with flaming red hair spoke gloomily.

“That’s... **Fliegende Bein**, Schneider.”

Charl softly warned them. Loki didn’t care as he spoke,

“Schneider. If you want a bloodbath that much—“

He didn't get to finish. His red hair standing on end, Schneider released his magic energy, his knight swinging its claymore down onto Cherubim.

Loki reacted instantly. Switching Cherubim into its humanoid form, it crossed its blade on both arms, blocking the claymore's strike.

Or rather, it failed to. The claymore cut through Cherubim's blade, sending the broken part flying through the air. The knight pushed Cherubim onto the ground, stomping on it.

It aimed the tip of the claymore at Cherubim's neck. The blade sliced through Cherubim's armour, cutting the neck open. A black liquid like oil began to spurt out.

By that time, the red hair was already in front of Loki's nose.

He had closed the distance between them! Charl, Frey and Raishin were unable to react. Schneider sent Loki flying, then mounted him and brought his hands around Loki's neck.

There was a violent light in his eyes. At this rate he was going to crush Loki's windpipe—

“Stand down, *Fünf*.”

Rosenberg's automaton gripped tightly onto Schneider's arm, stopping him.

The muscles in his arm were being crushed by the grip causing him to howl in pain. Schneider reluctantly let go, rubbing his arm as he did so. His knight released Cherubim as well, sheathing its claymore back into its scabbard.

Having watched the whole thing unfold from start to end, Raishin was shaken.

He had been defeated! Although he was wounded— but Loki had lost!

Her silver fluttering, Alice tilted her head.

“Why did you stop? You went out of your way to lure him here, after all.”

“We’ve been too flashy. Before long the security guards and executive committee will turn their attention here. If we allow observers to discover us, then this will not be a simple personal grudge anymore. They will find out about our organisation. Ergo, we should withdraw now. Furthermore, killing other students would result in disqualification.”

“Is that really ok, Rosenberg?”

“Is it? Is it really?”

The students who appeared to be twins flew at Rosenberg from either side.

“*Ja, Zwei und Drei*. I assure you if I wanted to take care of them, it would be no problem.”

“You were always too cautious. How tedious, Rosenberg.”

Alice shrugged her shoulders, and turned to face her own follower— Shin.

“In that case we’ll be leaving as well, Shin. We have to settle the matter of your punishment.”

“As you wish.”

They retreated. A flustered Raishin shouted “Wait!” after them.

But of course, no one paid any attention to him.

Disappearing just like they had appeared, their figures blended into the forest, turning invisible.

The knights, the students, and Yaya.

“Yaya! Don’t go, Yaya!”

Yaya had a pained expression on her face as she turned her back on him.

Raishin desperately stretched his hand out for her, but all his fingers swiped at was the empty air.

(6)

With the *Kreuzritter* gone, silence descended onto the forest once again.

“Loki... Are you ok...?”

“Don’t touch me!”

Loki pushed Frey away, then spoke brusquely.

“... I’m fine.”

“But... there’s blood.”

Just by looking at him, Raishin could tell that the base of Loki’s neck and his back had been split open.

But he hadn’t been cut there. While Raishin was confused, Loki glared at Frey.

“I said I’m fine. Stop making a fuss!”

He was clearly irritated. His embarrassing defeat rankled.

Raishin was also irritated. His irritation and unease was almost at the point he wanted to scream out loud.

He was in turmoil. A lot had happened suddenly, and some weird people had popped out of nowhere, and now regret and shock was mixing together, causing his head to throb.

He had fail to get Yaya back. Even though she had been right there in front of him.

“Loki. Raishin. Firstly, calm down.”

The cool voice that spoke belonged to none other than Sigmund.

“This is what I think— That weird group is keeping tabs on all of you. Yes, all. I know you all are destined to clash in the Night Party, but for now you share a common interest. Shouldn’t you co-operate now in order to overcome this pressing issue at hand?”

His logic was obvious. No one raised an objection.

“In that case, Raishin. Let’s hear your story first. What happened? Why is Yaya with them?”

“I... have no idea either.”

Shaking his head in confusion, Raishin somehow got his words out.

Yesterday, Yaya’s behaviour had been strange.

After the Night Party, when he had regained consciousness, she had been crying.

It was time for the afternoon lectures, but no one left. Frey brushed her dogs’ fur while Loki performed emergency repairs on Cherubim’s head as they listened to Raishin.

After hearing the broad outline, Charl was the first to raise a question.

“So you’re saying, that girl left by her own will?”

“Yeah.”

“That poor thing... It must be because her dissatisfaction had built up.”

Charl looked up at the sky with pity in her voice.

“She probably got fed up with such a terrible partner.”

“What did you say!?”

“Or perhaps, she got tired of all the perverted requests...”

“Don’t look at me with that look! You know very well that Yaya and I haven’t done anything, right?!”

“Raishin... how lewd... you pervert.”

“You too!? Don’t label me with weird names!”

After Frey chimed in, there was a few moments of silence before Raishin sighed.

“I might have been too quick to agree earlier. I know I said she left of her own will, but it was actually a little different.”

Sigmund tilted his head like a little bird.

“So they forced her?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know... but it’s unthinkable. I refuse to believe that Yaya would ever leave my side on her own volition.”

“Did you hear that, Frey? Where do you think that confidence comes from?”

“Uu... Raishin... You’re too overconfident!”

“What’s with you two!? Wait, when did you get along so well!?”

Of course, the two girls getting along with each other was a good thing, so he didn’t comment any further.

“Damn it. If only I had noticed it earlier...!”

Raishin wrapped his head in his arms, beating his temples.

“At any rate, we have to hurry. If Yaya is absent, you cannot return to the Night Party.”

“That’s not the problem here!”

He raised his voice without thinking. Coming to a start,

“No, sorry. Of course the Night Party is important. It’s the reason I came all the way to England. But Yaya... I was just thinking what might have happened to her...”

Charl and Frey lowered their eyes, falling into silence.

Yaya was a top class automaton. If she fell into the hands of a world power, it went without saying she would be dissected and taken apart.

With a snort, Loki stood up.

“If that’s the case, then it’s your problem. I’m leaving. If I may say so, I am a tolerant person but I don’t plan on getting familiar with others.”

Picking up the broken blade, he walked away with light steps. He took the animal trail back. Cherubim followed behind him, its head wobbling from side to side.

His words were cold, but Loki left in a hurry— without even stopping to take his crutch— for which Raishin was grateful. He couldn’t say it out loud, but he muttered his thanks inwardly.

“Charl, Frey. The both of you should go back to class. Sorry for making you accompany me this long.”

“Hmph. Stop trying to act all cool, you annoyingly insolent cad. You can’t even walk in your condition, can you? It can’t be helped, I’ll escort you to the ward at the very least. We can fly on Sigmund.”

“No, there’s no need.”

Charl was flabbergasted, then startled.

“You... aren’t planning on searching for her, are you?!”

“I know they’re students. Which means they should have hidden Yaya somewhere on campus.”

“Wait a minute! Do you even know what state you’re in—“

Sigmund pulled Charl's hair, whispering something in her ear. Raishin didn't know what he said, but Charl's mouth clamped shut and she grumpily turned her back on him.

"Hmph. Fine! Do as you please! I hope you fall over and die, then the birds feed on your body! I hope the worms in the soil eat you as you decompose back into the earth!"

Her shoulders shaking with anger, she left.

Frey looked like she wanted to say something, but after staring at Raishin, she wordlessly mounted Rabi and left.

Finally, Raishin was the only one left in the forest.

Half a day passed.

Raishin hadn't attended any of his lectures, but wandered aimlessly inside the primeval forest.

Once again, it hit him just how large the academy grounds were. Sweat falling off his face like the dew on the ground and leaves, he persevered until evening. In the end, he had accomplished nothing fruitful.

The soles of his feet felt hot. The pain had finally forced him to stop, his rib and collarbone hurting so much they felt like they were about to break again. Finding it difficult to just walk, he had no choice but to return to the main street.

Looking like a wild beast that had stumbled out, the other students were startled by his appearance.

He was used to their stares. Raishin collapsed onto a bench, regulating his breathing.

He had wasted all that time. That was a stupid thing to do, even for him.

What he should have done was to gather information.

If he had asked Frey nicely, would she have lent her Garm types to help?

But depending on her all the time was bad. Frey was busy with the Night Party, her studies, and her club activities— all that meant she was probably very busy.

(Yaya... Where the hell are you...?!)

Suddenly, the sweet smell of incense entered his nostrils.

“I’m astounded to find you in such a sorry state, boy.”

Absentmindedly lifting his head up, he saw a bewitching beauty in front of him.

Beauty that wouldn’t lose to the puppets she created, and a lens inserted into the eyepatch she wore. Behind her, a silver haired maiden followed in tow.

“Shouko... Irori...”

He finally remembered the conversation he had earlier this morning.

“I couldn’t believe my ears when they told me the military’s



dog was

uncontactable.”

“Sorry about that. But it’s good you’re here. Lend me a hand. Yaya has—“

Halfway through his sentence, he noticed Irori’s behaviour was strange.

Her long eyelashes were cast down, and she was looking at her feet like she was trying to endure something.

“... Irori. What’s wrong?”

There was no response. Irori’s shoulders trembled wordlessly.

In place of Irori, Shouko spoke in a grave tone.

“Listen carefully, boy.”

“Ah... Yeah?”

“Give up on Yaya. From now onwards, you’ll be using Irori.”

Unable to comprehend what he had just heard, Raishin stared at Shouko with a dumbfounded expression on his face.

Chapter 3 – Words to Stop a Heart

(1)

The Walpurgis Royal Academy of Machinart was illuminated by the pale light of dusk.

Behind the medical faculty, inside a grove of trees, it was just about to turn dark.

With a half-mantle draped over his shoulder, Loki entered inside. His mechanical puppet Cherubim followed behind him, staring at its master with a gleam in its eye.

“Loki.”

Standing up from a bench, a barefooted girl greeted him. Her white one-piece dress was like another moon in the sky. Her long hair flowed in the wind, wavering momentarily.

Her white skin flushed, and she beamed brightly like a flower blooming.

“You came.”

“... I was the one who asked if we could meet again.”

“Is it ok? Aren’t you forbidden from leaving the ward?”



“It’s not

something you need to concern yourself with.”

The girl cast her eyes downwards. Loki hurriedly added on.

“Cruel is not that stubborn a person. There are many ways to pacify him.”

“... Thank you. Loki is really kind.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not a kind person at all.”

“I’m sorry...”

She cast her eyes downward again. Loki clicked his tongue,

“Don’t just stand there. Sit down.”

“Ok...”

She lowered her thin waist onto the bench. As she did so, her shoulders trembled slightly.

Loki took off his mantle, draping it over her head.

“Loki...?”

“... Seeing you shiver like that is an eyesore.”

“Tee hee... As I thought, Loki is really kind...”

She buried her face in the mantle and pressed it against her cheeks.

“It’s warm...”

The sharp look usually inside Loki’s eyes vanished. When he noticed it himself, Loki forced a severe look, and sat down next to her a little too violently.

“... I don’t know your name.”

The girl was startled, then gave a self-depreciating laugh.

“I’m the Fragarach Mark 5—“

“That’s not a name for a human.”

“But you noticed it already, haven’t you? I’m an automaton...”

“You’re human.”

“...!”

“If I accept that you’re an automaton, it means my sister and I are automata too. ... You should already know this, right? We siblings have a mechanical heart.”

Eventually, the girl softly whispered her name like it was some kind of secret.

“Sophia.”

“Sophia, huh?”

“What about Loki’s real name?”

“Loki is fine.”

“That’s unfair.”

“It’s not unfair. This is punishment.”

“... Punishment?”

“We decided to call ourselves this.”

The girl— Sophia nodded in understanding, then fell silent.

She remained deep in thought for about ten seconds. Finally, she turned to him like she made up her mind.

“Hey, Loki. Have you ever thought ‘I want to die’...?”

“... No. I’m not that noble. If you talk about how many times I’ve thought ‘I don’t want to die.’ however, I can tell you I’ve thought that countless times.”

“You’re strong.”

“I’m not—“

“I’m just... so tired...”

Her voice choked up. Stealing a glance at her, Loki’s breath froze.

Something wet and shiny was flowing down her cheeks.

“I hate... conflict.”

“__“

“I hate it... People dying... All that killing...!”

Her tears continued to fall one after another.

Her small shoulders shook like she was trying to endure the pain, and she hugged herself.

On the spur of the moment, Loki stretched out his hand towards her—

But stopped himself halfway.

He didn’t know the appropriate thing to do at this moment.

While feeling irritated by his helplessness, but at the same time at a loss over what to do, he waited for her to stop crying.

After she had calmed down, Sophia wiped her tears away, and apologised.

She gave an earnest look at Loki as she spoke.

“You know... I actually have a request for Loki.”

“A request?”

“I—“

She told him her request. Hearing it, for a brief moment, Loki’s heart stopped beating.

(2)

The moment he understood Shouko’s words, for a split second, Raishin’s heart skipped a beat.

He turned reflexively towards Irori. But Irori didn’t meet his gaze.

Shouko reached into her sleeve, pulling out a board that was roughly the size of a hand mirror.

Thin grooves had been carved both vertically and horizontally onto it, and words had been inscribed delicately in code onto it. Just by looking at it, he could sense the magic energy it carried. There were two lights glowing on top of it like fireflies.

“This panel is an approximation of the Machine City. This light is Irori, and this light is Komurasaki.”

“... Where’s Yaya’s?”

“Gone. Yaya’s reaction has vanished. In other words, she’s dead.”

What did she say...!?

“— Or, it could mean her magic energy has been sealed off. In other words, she’s fallen into someone’s hands. Her functions have already stopped, and she’s being kept in that state.”

“In that case, it means she’s alive.”

“It’s the same as death. It’s not possible to bring her back. That’s why you should give up on her. In her place, you’ll be using Irori—”

“How can you expect me to just accept that!?”

“I can. Watch closely.”

At the same time she spoke, Shouko released magic energy.

Charging Irori’s magic circuit, Irori’s eyes began to shine with a silver light, and the air, the wind, the atmosphere around them literally froze solid.

A large ice pillar formed directly next to Raishin, its size and height rivalling that of the clock tower.

The water vapour in the atmosphere had frozen in an instant. Along with the frigid air it gave off a cold sense of death. The legs of the students passing by gave way, and they screamed in fright.

With a snap of her fingers, the pillar shattered. There was a mysterious crackling sound as the pillar disintegrated into a fog of ice, melting in the warm wind.

“This is the Himokagami circuit. Irori’s offensive strength is far superior to that of Yaya’s—“

“I wasn’t talking about that!”

Raishin stood up, drawing closer to Shouko with enough force to grab her attention.

“If she’s alive, why aren’t you going to save her!? If she was stolen, why aren’t you doing anything to retrieve her!? If you don’t want to, then I’ll go look for her—”

He tried to turn on his heels, but then he noticed something weird. His legs wouldn’t move. They wouldn’t even budge!

Looking down, he saw his shoes had been frozen, gluing them firmly to the stone pavement.

Unable to move, Shouko slapped him.

Her strength was unbelievable. The ice around his feet broke, and Raishin was sent tumbling onto the pavement.

“Listen to the end, boy.”

Her words were cold. Looking up into her eyes, he could see killing intent in Shouko’s eyes.

“This morning, a guest arrived. Choosing direct contact was rather audacious, I might add.”

Raishin thought back to the phone call this morning. On the other end, something had happened.

From Shouko’s words, when she said ‘guest’, she probably meant the enemy—

“What do you think the guest said?”

Shouko laughed cynically as she asked rhetorically, then continued.

“We desire friendly relations between our countries. Nevertheless, we cannot overlook slander or libel against our country’s name. We strongly urge you to consider carefully— in summary, if you falsely accuse us over anything, it will lead to war.”

“False accusations? But we haven’t said anything yet...”

“Exactly, they made the declaration while we still didn’t have an understanding of the situation. In short, they’ve forestalled us.”

By telling them not to take any measures, effectively it was a warning to surrender.

“The intelligence branch has investigated the matter. The ringleader is a member of a German noble family, Rosenberg. If you behave recklessly, then I can tell you for sure it will end up becoming war.”

Cold sweat dripped down Raishin’s back.

He felt like the situation was far greater than he had thought. It was no longer just his problem alone.

“But we can’t just let the matter drop! Yaya is still in their hands...”

“Yaya’s magic circuit and construction aren’t so simple. Dismantling her will take several years. Replicating the internal mechanism will take even more. Even once they’re able to make a full copy of Yaya, it will be a long way before she’ll be able for actual combat deployment. Furthermore, if we were to go to war, in reality, the Japanese army is not at a disadvantage—“

“I don’t care about that!”

Raishin struck the stone pavement, staring at Shouko, whose face was composed.

“Are you telling me to stand back and watch Yaya die...!?”

“It’s what the military brass have decided.”

“Even so!”

“Who’s your master, boy?”

Raishin fell silent. Shouko continued to press him,

“You’ve already disobeyed my orders countless times, boy. You even lied to me once.”

Raishin clenched his fists. He couldn’t argue against that.

“You’ve yet to accomplish anything. Do you want to return to Japan and live out your bitter life like you used to?”

“ ... ”

“If that’s the case, you’ll be... disposed of since you know military secrets.”

“ ... ”

“Do you remember our wager? I can take your life now, if you want?”

“... Do you really think I would give up on Yaya to save my own life?”

Of course, he wasn’t planning to die. There was still the matter of taking his life.

“That’s true. Using your own life against you as a hostage would be useless. So I’ll ask you this instead. Do you fully understand the implications of “starting a war”, boy?”

Raishin frowned. What did she mean?

“Have you ever heard of the phrase, Europe’s powder keg?”

“... The Balkan peninsula?”

He had heard something like that during his history classes. He didn’t have an in-depth knowledge of the subject matter though.

“It’s a place where people of different nationalities are all jumbled together. And each and every one of them desires their own country state. That’s the gunpowder.”

Raishin waited in silence for Shouko to continue. Irori seemed puzzled as well, straining her ears to listen in.

“There’s a very volatile tension between Austria and Serbia over a territorial dispute. Backing Austria is Germany, and Russia are the ones controlling Serbia behind the scenes.”

“... So it’s a proxy war between the larger countries?”

“In all likelihood, this time Russia is the one who’s going to make concessions. Between the Russo-Japanese war and the civil revolution, the Russian empire is on the verge of collapse. However—“

She suddenly pointedly a long and beautiful finger at Raishin’s chest.

“That’s where you come in, boy. Japan is an ally of England. If word got out that an ally’s automaton— which contains national secrets— was stolen, what do you think England would do?”

“Well... To save face, they would have to apply pressure on Germany to return it...”

“That’s right. Furthermore, depending on the circumstances they might even harbour secret designs on those secrets. And obviously, Germany would naturally reject such a demand as a matter of pride. If this dispute between Germany and England were to become public, then Russia would no longer fear Germany. You can rest assured that Serbia and Austria will be plunged into war... And if that comes to pass, all the neighbouring countries will get caught up in it.”

The flames of war would spread throughout the world.

It would be on a scale with which the world had never seen till now. The whole of Europe would be engulfed in conflict!

“Something like a transfer student’s automaton is just a small spark, but that small spark alone will ignite the powder keg. I don’t have any interest in watching the world burn... But do you have the resolve to pull the trigger and start a world war, boy?”

Raishin bit his lip.

Not a sound escaped from his mouth.

(I... I’ve been such a naïve brat!)

He had only thought about himself. He hadn’t considered the big picture at all.

It was no longer a problem whereby Raishin could hope to solve it by carelessly throwing his life away.

The world, and Yaya.

If they were both placed on a scale, it would be skewed heavily in one direction.

“If you understand, show some self-restraint. Irori, I’m leaving him in your hands.”

“Yes, mistress.”

Leaving the rest to Irori, Shouko turned around and departed rapidly.

(3)

With Irori in tow, Raishin returned to the medical faculty.

Cruel was like a volcano erupting, his admonition flying like bullets from a machine gun. But once he saw Raishin not reacting to any of his scolding,

“... Enough. Just get back to bed and recuperate!”

Tossing out those words, he dismissed Raishin.

Exiting the medical office, he entered the ward.

It was completely empty. Loki’s figure was nowhere to be seen. Cherubim and Frey were not there either.

Abruptly, he noticed there was an envelope lying on his bed.

Tearing it open, he retrieved its contents and read it.

“Raishin? What is it? A letter...?”

“It’s a love letter.”

“Eh!? R-Raishin is unexpectedly such a smooth operator!”

Irori was flustered. Although she had a slender and fine figure, despite her mature air she was totally clueless when it came to affairs of love. Raishin folded the letter and pocketed it.

“You know, now that you’re here, who is guarding Shouko?”

“Don’t worry about Shouko. The army sent someone to protect her.”

— He grew uneasy.

In the first place, considering and compared to Irori’s strength, no matter who they sent it would still make him uneasy.

“Ah, by the way Raishin...”

“What? Why are you fidgeting like that?”

“Is It really ok for me to perform night duties in a place where there’s going to be other people around?”

“You don’t have to! Or rather, don’t!”

“But Yaya says she services you every night—“

“That’s just what she says! Nothing happened at all!”

“But Mistress says if young people like Raishin don’t manage to release their seed, they will fall into depression—“

“Even Shouko!? What kind of upbringing did she give you!?”

Seeing Raishin in fierce denial, Irori giggled.

“I’m joking. It’s a joke, Raishin.”

Placing her hand over her mouth, she elegantly laughed. Raishin felt a chest pain he could do nothing about.

“... Don’t overdo it, Irori.”

“Did you say something, Raishin?”

She smiled at him. Irori had probably pretended not to hear his last sentence.

So Raishin pretended like he hadn't said it as well.

“Sorry. Can you make some tea?”

“Of course.”

Irori smiled as she nodded, exiting the ward.

As she closed the door, the fact that there was an unnatural glistening at the edge of her eyes did not escape Raishin's notice.

Although Yaya considered her a nuisance, Irori doted on Yaya a lot. Irori's unusual chattiness was probably down to the fact she was worried sick about Yaya.

He could only wonder how she was feeling, having been told to give up on Yaya.

His helplessness turning into anger, Raishin clenched his fists. At that moment, there was a knock on the glass, as if a certain someone had waited for Irori to leave the room.

After a while, Irori came back with a pot of black tea.

“... Raishin?”

There was no longer anyone in the room.

Wind was blowing in through the open window, causing the white curtain to flap in the breeze.

(4)

Led by Sigmund, Raishin exited out onto the main street.

It was busy with activity. The street was full with students all heading to the field of battle. As yesterday's battle had been the first real fight in a while, there was a buzz of expectation for tonight as well.

By the side of the street, Charl was sitting on a bench under a streetlight, a grumpy expression on her face.

Without Sigmund by her side, she looked very uneasy as she kept glancing at her surroundings.

"Thanks for coming, Charl."

Hearing Raishin's voice, Charl's expression softened, then she turned her head haughtily.

"I overheard something about the *Kreuzritter*, so I went out of my way to tell you about it. Be grateful, and listen reverently."

"Ah yeah, you have my gratitude. I humbly beg you to tell me."

"Y...y-you being so honest is creepy. It's unsettling and disgusting."

A red faced Charl hurled abuse at him. She then coughed and made a grand gesture of clearing her throat.

"Tonight's scheduled entrant is the 74th seat, and I checked up on all the individuals up to that seat who are taking part in tonight's Night Party. England, Holland, Spain, India—the countries the participants are from are all over the place."

"But they're from Germany, aren't they? Are their nationalities all fake?"

"No, they're all real. Lying about something like that would get you expelled."

Just like Henri, whose papers had falsifications and so she had been expelled.

“Although at first glance they look like random people jumbled together, they all have something in common, besides their automata. All of them got into the academy through something called a Lawrence scholarship.”

“A scholarship... So they’re paying for their tuition?”

“They’re paying via the scholarship. The Lawrence scholarship is based in London. It collects donations from the public and pays for gifted students’ tuition.”

“That’s quite a roundabout way to do it. So? The ones making the donations are from Germany, I suppose?”

“The *Kreuzritter* don’t even bother to hide the fact they are. They proudly announce it, it seems. In fact, by making known to the public that they’re sponsoring several students, it could also be a method to apply pressure onto the other Night Party participants.”

Hypothetically, if Loki, Frey and Raishin were to drop out tonight.

It would mean there would only be the *Kreuzritter* left on the field. Every future entrant would have to challenge them alone.

The only alternative would be to gather allies just like them...

“By the way, why did they put themselves in such a low position?”

“I’m shocked, you idiot. Off the top of my head, I can think of three reasons. Firstly, manipulating results are easy. Their efforts would be meaningless if they weren’t grouped together. Getting placed in sequence at a lower rank would be much easier than getting placed in sequence at a higher ranking.”

“I see. What about the second?”

“The state of the Night Party is still in flux. If there another team formed up before them, it would cause the whole situation to become very complicated.”

“That sounds reasonable. And the third?”

“They would be able to challenge seventy odd people. Do you understand?”

Charl brought her lips together, lowering her voice so the other people couldn't hear her.

“The ultimate aim of the Night Party isn't just to get the Wiseman's Throne. Just like what D-Works did...”

“Testing of Machinart.”

“Everyone's been saying it, you know. There are a fair number of prototypes entered. In other words—“

“By fighting other countries' prototypes, they can steal their latest techniques?”

“There's no better way to collect information than through actual combat. By taking part in practical combat, you can readily grasp strengths and weaknesses.”

Was that the reason for such a high number of people!?

There were fourteen— even with five gone, there were nine remaining. It was hardly a lost to them.

If they managed to last all the way to the end, then the Wiseman now and the next few ones would be—

Furthermore, they would be able to investigate other countries' Machinart, and if circumstances permitted, even steal it.

What a crafty bunch. To say nothing of their greed too.

“It's sickening... Thanks for investigating all of that for me.”

“D-don't get the wrong idea. I told you it's just something I overheard. Your hearing must be as bad as your face. Your memory is also terrible. I'm Charlotte of the house of Belew. Why would I go to all the trouble just for your sake?”

“Charl went all the way to the executive committee and demanded all the information they had.”

“B-b-be quiet Sigmund! I’ll change your lunch from chicken to cricket larvae!”

Charl turned bright red and turned her head in the opposite direction.

“I might have to face them eventually. Assuming they keep winning and advancing through each round. It’s only natural I would plan a countermeasure if that time comes. Furthermore... They’re people who kidnap other people’s automata, and automata aren’t just objects.”

There was a flash of anger in her eyes. Just like Frey and her Garm types, Charl treated automata as family.

Feeling his chest warm up suddenly, Raishin turned his face away.

“... Thanks.”

“M-m-m-more importantly, what are you going to do!? Even with my strength, we still couldn’t figure out where they took her to. We don’t have any cards left to play.”

“No, I know where they were. The truth is, Frey just—“

Halfway through his sentence, he realised something with a start.

He stiffened up, like something had just crashed into him.

I’ve been such an idiot! Like Charl said, I really am an unbelievable idiot!

It had slipped his mind. He hadn’t realised it at all. All his plans hadn’t considered such an important factor.

With Loki and Raishin hospitalised, they were excused from taking part but—

“What’s Frey going to do?!”

Charl and Sigmund stared at each other with dumfounded looks on their faces.

Frey didn't have an excuse to withdraw from the fight without forfeiting. In other words, she would have to face all nine of them by herself!

(What can we do....!?)

Should Loki and I support her?

No, that would be a poor plan. There were nine of them. Even with an increase in numbers on their side, it would still be overwhelming disadvantageous.

Furthermore, he thought back to the afternoon. Loki had been defeated in an instant. His body was still banged up and worn out. There was also the issue of whether Cherubim's repairs were fully done...

Also, Raishin didn't have his partner by his side.

Even though Irori's power was superior to Yaya's, she didn't have the bond forged through training together that Yaya and Raishin had. He also had never controlled Irori's magic circuit before.

This was like performing without a rehearsal. Not to mention, Raishin's body was pretty beat up too.

At this rate, the *Kreuzritter*'s victory was all but assured...

"She should forfeit."

Charl had no hesitation in her voice.

"It's a pity, but that's what she should do if she doesn't want her Garm types to die helplessly out there."

Frey's Garm types were built with living dogs as their base. They couldn't be repaired like normal automata. If they were destroyed, that was it for them.

Trying to comfort a gloomy Raishin, Charl had an unusual gentleness in her voice.

“They’re goals are the same, right? As long as Loki’s still in it, both their hopes aren’t extinguished just yet. Once Loki fully recovers, who’s to say he won’t have a chance of winning? By that time, the *Kreuzritter* may have even decreased in number.”

That was the best case scenario.

“Also, even for someone like Loki, having to fight with those people when he’s barely recovered is overdoing it.”

Originally, a temporary withdrawal due to injury was something that was disadvantageous. The students who withdrew faced a gap to overcome. They had to fight higher rank students while their senses were still dulled from inactivity.

Loki was initially a member of the Rounds. When factored in, normally no students would be of higher rank than him and so it wouldn’t be a problem. However, the *Kreuzritter* had deliberately placed themselves in lower ranks whilst hiding their true strength. Even if he did have multiple plans in place, ultimately the *Kreuzritter* were the ones holding the advantage.

Raishin ground his teeth, thinking.

Frey would mostly likely refuse to forfeit.

That was the strength of her resolve. She would surely pour her heart and soul into it.

If that was the case, Loki would ignore his injuries and assist Frey.

Loki would never abandon Frey. He would protect her to his dying breath. Their hearts were equipped with a special power. If pushed to the brink of death, then that power would be unleashed...

The automata would break— or the puppeteer would die first. Or the alternative was that both would happen.

(Damn it! Is there nothing I can do...!?)

Frey and Loki were enemies he would have to go up against eventually.

But when he thought about Frey's smile, or the times he and Loki fought back to back, or the Garm types wagging their tails... For some reason, giving up on them was something he couldn't bring himself to do.

He would have to get Yaya back. At once!

Raishin was just using Yaya as a tool for his revenge. Yaya had smiled while lending him her strength. Raishin knew he had to repay her thoughts and feelings.

He couldn't just abandon both Frey and Yaya.

So, what should he do? What could he do? What he could do...

At that moment, a light bulb went off inside his head.

“... Haha... Ha...”

Charl jumped in surprise, looking at Raishin like he was something unsettling.

“W-what with's you laughing out of the blue? You really are disgusting.”

“... I thought of something.”

Sigmund tilted his head, looking straight at Raishin's face.

“A solution to unknot this problem?”

“Yeah. A way to retrieve Yaya without having Frey forfeit.”

“Huh? Can you really do something as convenient as that?”

Charl stared at him with a mixture of faith and doubt. However, Raishin merely stood up from the bench.

“I can. The time limit is an hour before midnight— we still have slightly more than five hours.”

In order for Frey to fulfil her time obligation, she would have to return to the field no later than eleven. Looking at it the other way, it meant that as long as they could resolve the situation by then, everything would be peachy.

“Well then, what are you going to do, Raishin?”

“It’s simple— We just have to crush them.”

Laughing in response to Sigmund’s question. He placed a hand on Charl’s shoulder.

“W-w-what are you doing, you pervert.”

“Charl, Sigmund. I know very well that I have no right to ask you this, but— please. Lend me your strength.”

Charl went “Hmph!” and turned her head away. Brushing off Raishin’s hand, she crossed her arms.

“You really are an unbelievable idiot. The king of idiots. I said it once, didn’t I? As long as it’s one time... No matter what happens, I will protect you.”

“Charl... Does that mean?”

“If you tell me not to help, I’ll turn you into charcoal with the Lustre Cannon.”

“You’re a lifesaver!”

Raishin hugged her without thinking. She felt soft through her uniform, and fragile like she could break at any moment. Charl, being hugged out of the blue, rapidly fell into a panic.

“Ah—No— You— Stop that! Don’t... Ah... Lustre Cannon!”

(5)

“So, what are you expecting me to do?”

They were at the top floor of the Physics faculty. It was the floor reserved for teachers.

In one room, Professor Kimberly’s office, a sooty-face Raishin, a still grumpy Charl, and Sigmund were all calling on her.

The inside was clean and tidy. The table had been tidied up, and her materials had been arranged neatly. The floor had been scrubbed. In contrast to the other time he had visited her, it was as if it was a totally different room.

The one who had introduced order into the world of chaos— Henri was in her maid uniform, setting cups of black tea in front of Charl and Raishin. She had skill that Raishin would never have thought possible from former nobility.

Kimberly took a sip of tea that Henri had poured for her.

“You shouldn’t expect anything from Nectar. All we can do is just watch.”

“So you can do something as simple as observe, right?”

“Yes— What are you planning?”

“Something interesting. If possible, I would like some insurance though.”

“I’m telling you now, Nectar won’t be able to prevent a war from breaking out. The association just governs the ethical side of magi, but if it comes to war magi are merely a single weapon in a country’s armament. Furthermore, the Father advocates a policy of being only a spectator. We don’t participate in fierce conflicts.”

She had a cynical tone in her voice as she frankly told them the reality. It sounded like Kimberly herself was having issues with the stance the association was advocating.

“But you wish to observe the truth, right? As a third party with authority.”

“You know nothing of war. Not even in the slightest.”

She laughed coldly.

“Let’s say I record the mess you’re about to make. Anyone who sees it points out your innocence and the other party’s guilt. Now what do you think the other party will call such a recording?”

“... Propaganda.”

“That’s right. Since time immemorial, war has always been about manipulating rumours into a justifiable cause.”

“But the academy should be inclined to believe Nectar, right? Especially since—the sly old fox is bound to believe it for sure.”

He was referring to the headmaster, Edward Rutherford.

A mysterious man who always seemed like he had secret agendas.

“That is true... If the association presented reliable evidence, then the academy would have to do something, since countries all over the world entrust their best and brightest to the academy and the academy cannot afford to be associated with these outlaws.”

To say nothing of what they would have to do if Raishin could produce evidence of the *Kreuzritter*’s illegal activities.

“That’s right, we can drive them into a corner with the threat of expulsion!”

Charl exclaimed in surprise. Raishin nodded.

“Once we do that, they will not be able to control who the next few Wisemans will be, and they won’t be able to steal other countries’ secrets. We will crush their goals, and they will no longer have any reason to exist.”

“Unbelievable! You’re such a blackguard! You’re such black-hearted pervert! I bet even your lower body shines with a black lustre!”

“Don’t say weird things like that! You’re supposed to be a lady of a noble house, right!?”

“Eh? Raishin’s frankfurter shines with a black lustre?”

Henri exclaimed while hugging onto her tray.

Instant silence descended upon the room.

Henri’s ears burned red as she fled to a corner of the room.

Kimberly continued speaking as if that last thing never happened.

“I got it. I’ll bite. Let’s say everything you’ve said is true. What’s your plan then?”

“I’ll sneak in into the enemy’s fortress.”

“—What?”

“They’re all gathered somewhere inside the academy grounds. They’re occupying an area illegally, which they would probably have modified to become their fortress. I’ll sneak in, and retrieve Yaya.”

With Raishin raising hell, the *Kreuzritter* would have to postpone their participation in the Night Party, being compelled to defend their base. With the decrease in numbers on the field, Frey would have a greater chance of surviving tonight.

This was how he planned to save both Frey and Yaya.

More importantly though, this method— meant that they could use Sigmund's strength!

“You realise any form of unilateral attack will result in you becoming the academy's enemy, right?”

“I'm just going in to take Yaya back. If she's there, my theory will have been proven.

“And if she's not? They can feign ignorance, and your theory won't have a leg to stand on.”

“If that happens, my name will be erased from the school register, and everything will end.”

Kimberly stared at Raishin with narrowed eyes, before sighing.

“I told you I hate idiots, didn't I? Let's say, for argument's sake, that you find Yaya, and can prove the validity of your claims—how are you going to fight all nine of them? Have you thought about that, Second Last?”

“I've always been bad with math. I have no clue what numbers mean.”

Pffft, went Kimberly as she suddenly spat out.

She held her sides as she laughed.

Raishin, Charl and Henri stared at her in amazement. They felt like this was the first time they had ever seen Kimberly laugh so enjoyably.

“Ah, I get it. I understand. Do your best, and force the impossible. I'll be your backup.”

“I am in your debt!”

“You're already in so much debt I don't see how you're ever going to pay it off in one lifetime.”

Kimberly grinned. Raishin gulped.

It was true. He was always in other people's debt. The most obvious was Kimberly, but he was also in Frey's debt and Charl's too.

However, he had to get Yaya back at any cost. If he didn't, he would never be able to defeat Tenzen— and he also had a large debt of gratitude to Yaya herself.

Suddenly, something tugged at him abruptly.

It felt like he was overlooking something very huge and important.

Raishin stood up, heading for the door. Charl had a serious face as she looked up at him.

“... Are you going?”

“Just to the toilet.”

“Wha—You— Are you an idiot!? Do you want to die!?”

“Shut up! It's a biological reaction! What do you expect me to do if I feel the urge halfway during the battle!?”

“J-j-just hurry up and go! I hope it gets caught in your fly later!”

“What!? If it gets caught there will be a bloody tragedy!”

Charl wailed on him with her fists, chasing him out of the room. Raishin walked down the quiet hallway.

Washing his face in the sink, he cleaned off the cold sweat and cooled his head off.

Being alone in a quiet space, he realised a small oversight.

The image of the silver haired girl, Alice Bernstein, surfaced in head.

She was the one who had masqueraded as Cedric Granville the last time... right? Shin was with her, and even after her drastic change in appearance her speech and emotions were the same as he remembered.

She was quite the strategist.

Without getting her own hands dirty, she managed to get Charl to try to assassinate the headmaster. And right now she was manipulating Yaya to get to Raishin. Her intellect was superior to Raishin's without question. If that was the case...

Had she already foreseen what Raishin was about to do?

In fact— had she been aiming for it?

There was a possibility! This was an oversight!

He couldn't just proceed like this. He had to be prepared for any traps the enemy might have set in advance.

What was Alice's ultimate goal? By forcing Raishin to attack the fortress, what was she hoping to gain?

(— Don't tell me...)

Raishin was startled. Right now, he just thought of a prey for them who was short on hands and would be a valuable prize...

But their greed was unbelievable! Not only did they steal Yaya, they actually were aiming for something else altogether!

Having said that though, he couldn't give up on retrieving Yaya. This battle was also designed to help Frey. He had no other choice but to go through with it.

(Damn... Is there anything I can do...?)

While deep in thought, a familiar face floated into his mind.

In the past, when he was at his dojo, his sword instructor who was fond of shogi had said this to him. You cannot move according to how to enemy thinks you will move. If however, you find yourself forced to enter the enemy's trap—

“If that time comes, you should do an impossibly stupid move, and confound the enemy.”

Raishin began to think. What was an impossibly stupid move?

“Hey... I can't be serious, can I... well, it's true that there's no move left that could be considered more stupid.”

He started laughing. This plan was so bad it would leave him with no chance of victory.

But it was precisely because it was so stupid that he might be able... to outsmart her.

Raishin fell silent, inspecting his terribly bad plan.

“... Alright. I should be able to catch them off guard with this.”

“Actually no, I fear it will be in vain.”

Hearing a voice suddenly come from behind, Raishin instinctively turned around.

Soundlessly concealing his presence, there was someone standing outside the window.

There was an afterglow in the sky. Floating there was a tall man with tinted glasses— Shin.

The next instant, Shin kicked the window, flying in.

With hammer-like force, his foot crashed into Raishin's torso. Following through, he pivoted in a semi-circle. The kick maintained its inertia, throwing Raishin clean out of the window.

Chapter 4 – You Cannot Stop Me

(1)

This took place yesterday.

After Yaya flew out of the ward, she had encountered a lone girl in the forest.

The girl called herself Alice Bernstein—

“Now, please stop crying. You’re such a cute doll.”

Alice gently and kindly wiped her cheeks with a handkerchief.

Yaya was confused by her actions, but let Alice continue to wipe away her tears.

Alice smiled gently. Her silver hair sparkled dazzlingly, and her features were as perfect as an exquisite doll. When Yaya thought that someone like her was human, it was almost unbearable.

Alice stared at Yaya, then nodded like she had seen through her.

“I see. You’re in love with Raishin Akabane.”

“—!”

“It’s not strange that I’d know. You two keep causing great disturbances throughout the campus and it’s very eye-catching.”

She laughed lightly, then looked over at Yaya with pity in her eye.

“... How tragic. You’re a doll and he’s a human.”

Yaya began to sniffle again, and she hurriedly turned her face away.

Leaning over her shoulder, Alice brought her face next to Yaya’s and whispered in her ear.

“Furthermore, you’re making him not need you.”

“—T-that’s not true!”

“But you’re weak, aren’t you?”

“Yaya... is weak...?”

“Why is it that he’s always injured? Why does he have to fight in such a reckless manner?”

“__“

“The three of you sisters are well known even in Europe. Snow, moon, flower—
Three automata with three different types of magic circuits installed. And
speaking of the doll of snow—“

Her words were quiet, but heavy like a giant’s hammer.

“She can annihilate enemies without him getting a scratch, or am I wrong?”

“If it was sis...”

Yaya couldn’t compare to Irori’s area control and domination of space.

If she had been there during the Cannibal Candy incident—

Irori would have solidified Cannibal Candy’s liquid form and smashed it to bits easily.

If she had been there during the time they infiltrated the D-Works institute—

Irori would have pulverised the short swords and nullified the Jet circuit.

Raishin would be able to fight Loki without getting harmed.

“If you’re really thinking about him, you should leave his side.”

It was like a blow to her skull.

Large drops of tears began to form and fall off her face.

“Ahh, I’m sorry. I hurt your feelings, didn’t I?”

Alice started wiping Yaya’s face with her handkerchief again.

“Don’t cry. I think there’s still a way you can be useful to him.”

“...?”

“There’s a good solution for all this. It’s very, very good. It will enable Raishin to use the doll of snow, prevent you from being scolded by Karyuusai, and on top that—“

She whispered sweetly.

“You can become human.”

Yaya’s eyes widened, and she involuntarily turned back to face Alice.

Alice suddenly moved away, speaking bluntly.

“It seems someone is coming. We’ll continue this conversation some other time.”

“W—wait!”

“No can do. But you should remember this well. If you’re really feeling the way you feel, the best thing to do now would be to say goodbye to him.”

“Say goodbye...”

“It’ll be jut for a little while. If you can just endure it for that little while, the both of you will attain happiness.”

Her silver hair flapping in the wind, Alice turned on her heel and walked away.

“Think about it carefully, my cute little doll.”

With a beautiful smile, she walked out of the forest.

Yaya stood there dumbfounded, watching her long silver disappear.

Eventually, the panting of the Garm types could be heard approaching in the distance.

(2)

Breaking the broken window even further, Raishin was flung out into the air.

Together with the broken pieces of glass, he hurtled towards the ground, which was a far ways from where he was—

However, before he smashed into the ground, something hit his back.

There was a crackling sound, then the sound of shattering. The glass— no, it was ice!

The crackling continued as he crashed through layer after layer of ice. Raishin began to calm down. The speed at which he was falling was decreasing. The multiple layers of ice was causing him to decelerate!

Eventually, Raishin landed on the ground as softly as if he had been wrapped in cotton.

The ice shattered into tiny pieces, enveloping the surrounding atmosphere with cold air.

“Are you alright, Raishin?!”

Kicking off from a branch, someone came flying lightly through the air. Her silver hair was tinged with a trace of blue as it swam in the air, and as she landed softly on the ground, Raishin was assured that Irori had arrived.

“Irori! Sorry for the trouble! Thanks for coming!”

“I have a lot of things I wish to say, but they will have to wait for later. The enemy is approaching!”

Her slit eyes were narrower than Yaya’s, and they were currently scanning the sky tensely.

“So you already had the snow one equipped. Pretty solid, Mister Akabane.”

Shin had admiration in his voice as he landed smoothly from the air.

Pressing the area where he had been kicked, Raishin asked through heavy breaths.

“... I’m just asking for the sake of asking, but do you plan on fighting me now?”

“You were almost killed just earlier, and you still wish to ask that?”

Shin took a long, hard look at Raishin, then suddenly burst into laughter as if he found something funny.

“I may be skilled at being the butler of the Bernstein family, but I won’t say I’m completely perfect. If I had to name a flaw, it would be my impetuous disposition.”

“You’ve succeeded in stealing Yaya away, surely you have no further use for me, right?”

“... It seems you do not know your own worth. Do you have any idea how valuable obtaining a living Akabane is?”

“So you’re going to steal me too? Is that the reasoning of a thief?”

“No, it’s the reasoning of a knight.”

“What—“

“Having you fall into your hands is secondary. My true goal is your elimination. I believe you said something earlier, ‘I should be able to catch them off guard with this’? To put it simply, with those words alone you’ve given me reason to be uneasy and provide the excuse I need to eliminate you—“

He released killing intent so powerful it could almost hit Raishin physically.

With the sudden surge in magic energy, a violent wind whipped up around them.

Irori braced herself, placing herself in front of Raishin to guard him.

“—You are dangerous.”

Shin spoke frankly.

“Even during our last encounter, you almost drove my mistress— who’s rotten and twisted nature is such that she loves outwitting people more than eating three meals a day— into a corner. If we had been under slightly different conditions, it might even have been my mistress’s loss.”

“And for that reason, you want to make me disappear?”

“No matter how dangerous you are, you will not be able to bring harm onto my lady if you aren’t able to do anything at all.”

“Aren’t you being a little too hasty? If the academy finds out you attacked me, your precious mistress will end up forfeiting her entry into the Night Party, right?”

“Your concern is not necessary. I am acting on my own volition. Once my Eve’s Heart has been taken apart and the log inspected, they will find that I acted without anyone’s magic energy controlling me— it will be revealed as an automaton going berserk.

Raishin stared at Shin, dumfounded.

His face showed that he wasn’t joking. Shin was dead serious.

“I’m shocked... If you have to resolve to be taken apart, it must mean you really adore her. It might not mean much coming from me, but you’re insane. How can someone as rotten in the head as your mistress be so important to—“

In an instant, Shin moved in anger.

It was an explosive acceleration. Reaching his maximum speed in an instant, he charged at Raishin.

He unleashed a violent kick from the front. If it hit Raishin, it would undoubtedly break his spine— but Irori had taken up position in front of Raishin.

Sparkling under the evening sun, a thick wall of ice appeared, stopping Shin's kick.

The ice was incredibly dense, looking rock solid and hard. A kick with enough power to blow away Sigmund was stopped for an instant!

Also, it would take a brief moment to completely smash the ice wall.

“Raishin! Your magic energy, please!”

Pushing Raishin in the back, she shouted out. Raishin immediately acknowledged her, channelling his magic energy.

He didn't understand the mechanism of the magic circuit Himokagami. Thus he relinquished control to Irori. Even then there were no problems as Irori's magic circuit activated.

Smashing apart the ice wall, Shin came charging in. Shards of ice came flying at him in response.

The shards of ice began to bulk up and elongate, forming sharp cones that attacked Shin from all eight directions.

They were like lances made of ice. Countless spears lunged at Shin.

Obviously, they didn't pierce his body. However, the fierce onslaught was like a rain of bullets. Having to withstand the relentless barrage, Shin's magic energy was visibly decreasing.

At this rate he would exhaust his magic energy!

Shin gave up on the assault, changing his vector abruptly and retreating.

“—!?”

Behind him, a fog of ice was lying in wait.

It sparkled like diamond dust. He plunged sheer into the fog. The next instant, the water vapour in the atmosphere froze instantly, covering Shin in a white layer of frost.

His movements were now dulled. His body was coming to a halt on the molecular level.

“Hear me, German puppet. You are already in my circle of winter.”

Clad in a bitingly cold layer of air, Irori spoke with a chilling tone in her voice.

“Perish in my gaol— Shimokuguri.”

With a sudden, sharp crackle, Shin’s body was frozen instantly.

Looking like a piece of fruit embedded in jelly, he was locked solid in a block of ice.

The decisive blow... was what Raishin thought, but the enemy was a formidable foe, and so it wasn’t over just yet.

Bursting out of the block of the ice, Shin came flying out.

He forcibly pulled his frozen hands and feet out, causing parts of his skins to be ripped off and fall out. Fresh blood dyed the block of ice a deep shade of red. However, Shin didn’t flinch. Barely clinging on to life and hope, he retreated at full speed.

Taking into the sky, he fled in the direction of the woods. Some kind of smokescreen formed behind him, causing Raishin’s vision to turn bad. — It seemed someone was using an illusion magic art.

Being unable to see their target put them at a loss. Irori gave up, turning back to face Raishin.

“My apologies, Raishin. I let him get away.”

Raishin watched wordlessly from start to finish.

Such fearsome power! The duo of Raishin and Charl— or rather the four of them had struggled against Shin, and Irori had single-handedly forced him into retreat.

“Irori... I... Thanks. You were a big he—“

“Just what were you thinking!?”

Being suddenly scolded by Irori, Raishin fell silent in embarrassment.

“How could you sneak out of the ward without even saying anything to your personal helper?! Have more faith in me!”

“... I’m sorry. But you’ve got one thing wrong.”

“Wrong...”

“You’re not my partner. You’re Shouko’s.”

“__“

“Therefore, I had to leave to retrieve mine.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! What can you do with your body in that state!?”

Irori was shouting so much she was turning blue in the face as she marched up to Raishin.

However, Raishin stuck to his guns to the very end.

“You inflicted a wound onto Shin— Which means now is our chance. I’m going to sneak in to their base and take Yaya back.”

“You mean to confront them!? I won’t let you! That would mean starting a war—
“

“I won’t let that happen. I don’t plan on causing problems for Shouko.”

They were arguing on different planes.

Irori realised that arguing about this would be a useless waste of time. Sighing, she spoke coldly.

“... Are you saying you’re set on going, no matter what?”

“Yeah.”

“Then, I will fulfil my role as Shouko’s partner.”

Irori’s silver hair floated into the air, spreading into a fan-shape.

“Even if it means putting you on ice.”

Irori began to radiate wild magic energy and killing intent, her power causing Raishin’s wounds to ache.

The next instant, Irori’s magic art activated, snaring Raishin’s limbs in chains of ice.

(3)

The light from the lamp flickered indistinctly in the dark room where Yaya was.

She was hugging her knees, curled up on the soft bed.

There were no windows, and the air was damp and chilly, but it was still quite a comfortable room.

There was a small table set at the foot of the bed. Tapestries were hung on the stone walls. The room itself was about the size of twenty tatami mats, and it was all reserved for Yaya’s personal use.

The cup of black tea left by Yaya on the table had long turned cold.

Yaya asked herself a question. How much time had passed since she had come here?

She had already lost all sense of time. Hugging her knees, she pressed them against her forehead.

Was coming here really for the best?

She wondered if she was still feeling worried about Raishin.

She shook her head vigorously, dispelling the numerous doubts in her mind.

(This is... All for Raishin's sake...)

Raishin's sake, Raishin's sake, she repeated to herself like a mantra as her tears fell from her face.

Yaya's absence would benefit Raishin— this was the harsh truth.

Just as a sob was about to leak out from her mouth, there was a sudden knock on the door.

“How are you feeling, doll of the moon?”

Without waiting for a response, the silver haired girl entered.

Alice Bernstein. On the surface she was the daughter of an American Baron, but in truth, the name Bernstein— it was one that was descended from Germanic nobility.

“You're crying again? You're such a crybaby.”

Alice giggled, wiping Yaya's tears away with a handkerchief. Her tone of voice sounded like a boy, but her gestures and mannerisms were feminine and kind.

Yaya let Alice continue what she was doing while asking her in an entreating voice.

“Will this really... help Raishin?”

“Of course. But to you, this might seem excruciatingly cruel though.”

Alice giggled, taking out a crystal ball from her bosom.

“Go on, take a look.”

“... Raishin!”

Raishin’s figure was displayed inside.

And he was in the middle of a battle!

“An impertinent Shin attacked him rather hastily. But there’s no need to worry. Look—“

Shin’s sharp kick crashed into the ice wall, the wall shielding Raishin from Shin’s attack.

After that, Irori’s magic circuit violently came to life.

Its destructive power was overwhelming. Bringing the surroundings under her control in an instant, Shin was frozen in a flash and forced to retreat.

Irori was strong. Way stronger than Yaya.

“Do you understand now? There’s only one person who’s the best fit for him.”

“... Yes... Yes.”

Yaya covered her face in her hands as she sobbed.

Alice sat next to Yaya, whispering words of comfort into her ear.

“Don’t cry. Everything will be fine. Our country’s techniques will turn you into a human, and you’ll be able to return to his side. This time not as a tool, but as a human girl.”

With a crestfallen expression on her face, Yaya nodded repeatedly.



A crack

opened up on Alice's face as she smiled.

"You can't leave the academy grounds, and you can't go back to Karyuusai. But we can hide you here. And Raishin Akabane will join forces with the doll of snow to win the Night Party."

"Yes..."

"You don't have to worry about anything. Although we're putting up a front of being the enemy, we have no desire to clash with the doll of snow. Because if we did, we would suffer heavy casualties."

"Yes..."

"We're just waiting for an opportunity to join forces with Raishin Akabane. His objective is Magnus, and as long as he has no designs on the Wiseman's throne, our goals are mutually beneficial. After all, he's a kind soul who doesn't like the fight needless battles, isn't he?"

"Yes..."

Yaya's was just hollowly repeating herself by now.

The light in her black eyes had vanished, and her vital functions had been reduced to just being enough to produce tears.

She had become a literal doll. Alice narrowed her eyes in satisfaction.

"You can just rest easy here, until the Night Party ends."

"Yes... Thank you very much."

Alice sat beside Yaya, wiping her tears away without any signs of growing tired of such an action, until Yaya finally stopped crying.

(4)

"Putting me on ice.... That doesn't sound good."

Raishin chuckled wryly, smashing the frost that had gathered around his limbs.

Irori's narrow eyebrows were twisted into a frown.

"In that case, please refrain from doing something foolish!"

"I refuse."

Irori's eyes gleamed. In an instant, the water vapour in the atmosphere froze, forming icicles in the air.

An icicle wedged itself into Raishin's arm, gouging a few centimetres inside his flesh.

A sharp pain raced throughout his nerves, and blood began to ooze out around the tip of the icicle.

As the icicle pierced Raishin, Irori spoke coldly.

"Do you want me to freeze your blood? Or do you want to lose an arm like this?"

She had a chilly killing intent. Her aura was causing the air around her to go below freezing point, making her seem like the Yuki-onna of legend.

Putting up a brave front through the pain, Raishin faked a shallow laugh.

"Fine, do it."

"__"

"Take my arm, or even my leg if you want."

"__"

"I'm going to where Yaya is, even if I have to crawl to get there. If you want to stop me, forget about taking an arm or a leg— you have to take my life to prevent me from going."

Crushing the icicle, he turned his back on her.

“Please refrain from going, Raishin!”

Her emotions crumbled. Clinging on to his back, Irori entreated him to stop.

“Please! For mercy’s sake! If you do something foolish now...”

“So you’re telling me to give up on Yaya?”

“Yes!”

“Then why are you crying?”

Irori came to a start.

Surprised, she touched her cheeks, realising that they were wet.

“I... said to give up, didn’t I?!”

She firmly stuck to her guns even with the tears flowing down her face.

“So... Raishin... You should give up too...!”

“I refuse.”

“I’ll serve as your replacement! I’ll do my best to make up for Yaya’s share, so—
“

“Listen well, Irori. My partner is the best automaton in the world. There’s no one in this world who can ever replace Yaya!”

Irori’s eyes widened, then the stern expression on her face wavered.

Her tears began to overflow. With her magic energy being released uncontrollably, the drops turned to ice before they hit the ground, tumbling like hail.

“Yaya is a tool I’m using for my revenge. Telling me to give up on her because I’ve lost her, or to discard her because I can’t use her anymore— If I really treated her like an actual tool, I would be the worst kind of devil.”

“This Irori finds your will and spirit very admirable... but in this world, spirit alone... cannot effect change in a hopeless situation!”

Her shoulders trembling, Irori’s voice was strained.

“Even earlier... If I had not been present, you would have surely been killed without question. A fall from that height would have meant certain death, or am I wrong?”

“But you did come.”

“—“

“It’s true that conviction alone will get nothing done. Even so—“

He laughed and pointed behind her.

“It’s conviction that pulls other humans together, right?”

Turning to face where Raishin had pointed, Irori’s eyes widened in surprise.

Appearing out of the shadows were five dog automata.

Leading the pack was a wolf dog, and there was a female student with pearl hair riding atop it.

Behind her, standing in the middle of the grove of trees, a male student was leaning against a large tree.

His arms were crossed and he had a sullen expression on his face. Next to him was a large sword.

Suddenly, there was the sound of wings flapping overhead. Looking up, she saw a steel coloured dragon landing. Riding the dragon was a beautiful blonde girl.

It was three puppeteers with their automata.

Irori was shocked, and turned to look at Raishin for confirmation of the situation. Raishin turned to Frey first.

“Yo, Frey. Are you perhaps, coming along for the ride?”

“Uu... I talked things over with Loki, and made up my mind.”

Frey nodded her head in affirmation.

“Even for me... this is the best way to remain in the Night Party. Teaming up with Yaya... co-operating with Raishin is the best way to fight against the *Kreuzritter*.”

Frey turned her head to the side.

“Uu... Charl, are you going as well?”

“If I left this king of idiots to his own devices, it would be the same as leaving him to die by the roadside.”

“So in other words, you’re worried about Raishin...”

“N-n-no! I’m just protecting the weak! It’s part of Noblesse Oblige!”

Ignoring a flustered Charl, Raishin called out to Loki.

“Loki. Are you tagging along?”

“Don’t ask the ridiculous, you idiot... Frey already answered your question, didn’t she?”

“Don’t try and start a fight now you idiot!? Just be honest and say you’re helping!”

“You’re the idiot. Who would help someone like you, you bullet idiot!”

“Shut up, you cannonball idiot!” “Get lost, you battleship shell idiot!” “Laser beam idiot!”

“Just. Shut. Up. Already! You’re both idiots!”

Charl threw herself in the middle, breaking up the fight. Raishin and Loki both harrumphed and turned their heads in opposite directions. They were acting like complete children. Sigmund sighed in a mixture of exasperation and resignation.

However— even if they quarrelled like children.

The three of them had lent him their strength.

That was why Raishin could turn to face Irori with a smile.

“Do you understand now, Irori? There are others who recognise my situation and are willing to go with me on an impossible mission. That’s why I can tell you right now— You cannot stop me.”

Irori’s lips trembled, unable to contain her emotions.

“Call Komurasaki here. And also, I have a big favour to ask of you.”

“A favour...?”

“You’re going to have the most important part. You are going to be the centrepiece of my impossibly stupid move.”

Irori wiped away her tears, blinking as if she had just seen something curious.

(5)

“Really, what a fine mess you’ve made, Shin.”

They were in a large windowless hall illuminated by the light of a magic art.

Plain scarlet cloth had been draped on all the walls, and a sturdy looking round table had been set in the middle of the room. Five students were seated around the table. Each respective student had their automaton standing behind them. Each automaton was clad in armour from head to toe, and they were all carrying their own weapons.

This looked like a strategy meeting of crusaders from ancient times.

A man dressed like a butler dragged himself to the front of the table.

Both his hands were stained with blood; just their sight alone looked painful. The healing process had already begun, but the pieces of skin dangling off exposed the raw flesh underneath, giving them a grotesque appearance.

One of the students seated at the round table—the silver haired beauty Alice, continued speaking in her teasing tone of voice.

“I know I told you to fake a loss, but I didn’t tell you to get beaten up so badly like that.”

“I apologise for my disgraceful appearance.”

“I had to expend needless magic energy just to save you, you know. Still, thanks to that we’ve managed to get a grasp on the doll of snow’s magic circuits—Himokagami’s power.”

She turned cheerfully to the male student seated the deepest in the room.

“You saw it as well, right Rosenberg? It looks like it’s going to be a fun party.”

“... Thou art always like that. Such a careless attitude will eventually lead to thine own downfall.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Hey, Alice.”

A red haired male student—Schneider cut in in front of Rosenberg. Hearing his mistress being addressed so rudely, Shin grew visibly angry, but Schneider ignored him and continued speaking.

“Isn’t it too early to be proclaiming you’ve foreseen everything? If they don’t move according to your prediction, then those that aren’t here will have been sent on a fool’s errand.”

The two girls on either side of Rosenberg chimed in while giggling.

“Not just a fool’s errand, but also a fool’s death!”

“A fool’s death, a fool’s death!”

“*Ruhe, Zwei und Drei.*”

Silencing the girls who were in high spirits, Rosenberg turned to Alice.

“Do you share *Fünf*’s concern as well?”

“Well, I’d be able to enjoy myself either way, so...”

Schneider started to radiate killing intent. As if to block off his line of sight, Shin stepped in between the two. However, Alice lightly placed a hand on his chest, pushing him back.

“There’s no need to worry. My predictions have never missed their mark.”

“... *Herr*. I feel I have to say something before this battle.”

Schneider stood up, glaring at Rosenberg with flaming eyes.

“I cannot comprehend why we let five people lose their qualifications last night. Treating them as sacrificial pawns, and sending them back to their home countries? And right now, if you tell me we’re going to do the same thing to the others remaining—“

“So what if that is so?”

Rosenberg stared back at Schneider with a cool gaze.

Both releasing magic energy, their gazes clashed, sparks flying everywhere.

The air began to thicken with tension. Behind Rosenberg, the small knight lifted its tower shield, and behind Schneider, the knight with a slim frame hefted its claymore.

With the air still strained, Rosenberg spoke in a dominating voice.

“Shin over there—he is the Mark 4 of the completed *Maschinensoldat*, and we have the Mark 5— prototypes used for military testing. What *Neun* and the others had were the Mark 3— old models that were incomplete.”

He continued callously in a detached voice.

“If we were to gauge their military potential on an index, they would be one-fifth our strength— was there any other use for them but to discard them?”

“I’m not talking about the puppets! I’m talking about our brethren!”

“Alright, that’s enough.”

A bright voice out of place with the heated conversation interrupted the passionate Schneider.

“Look at it this way. If the strongest sword and the strongest shield get into a verbal fight, won’t it end up in a contradiction? A quarrel between lovers is something even a dog wouldn’t get involved with— I believe that’s an oriental saying.”

Flashing a beautiful smile at the both of them, Alice admonished the pair.

“*Fünf*— Schneider. Your concerns are valid, but unfounded. Firstly, the four members not here have not been sent on a fool’s errand.”

She held out her crystal ball, beckoning him to look within.

“Ah! Raishin is coming here!”

“He’s coming, he’s coming! And the T-Rex, Sword Emperor and **Surround Roar** are with him!”

The girls numbered two and three were in high spirits. Just like they said, there were several other figures besides Raishin reflected in the crystal ball.

Rosenberg's eyes narrowed sharply.

"I see five Garm types... But this is inexplicable. I don't see the Sword Emperor's Cherubim, nor the T-Rex's Sigmund."

A sharp-eye deduction. No matter how much the image within the crystal ball scrolled, all they could see was Irori and the Garm types; the other automata were nowhere to be found."

"It would appear the Yaegasumi magic circuit has hidden their figures. They plan to attack us from a blind spot, it seems."

Alice giggled happily.

"Aren't you being a little too frightened, Schneider?"

"... Isn't it too strange? If they made their puppets disappear, why wouldn't they make themselves disappear as well?"

"They did."

"—?"

"My Eagle Eyesight reacts to living things. It's even able to penetrate magic arts to a certain level. That's why even though they should have vanished, they're showing up like this—"

Alice shrugged her shoulders slightly before continuing on happily.

"An automaton has a weaker response than a human. That's why with the added effect of the Yaegasumi, they don't show up. The Garm types are essentially modified dogs so they appear. As for the doll of snow appearing—it would appear her construction is unexpectedly similar to our own knights, no?"

"... Fine, whatever. Have they sensed us?"

"I don't think they've noticed us. Should we blindside them with a surprise attack?"

Alice turned to look at Rosenberg.

Shin, Schneider and the twins also turned to look at Rosenberg.

Rosenberg thought over the matter for a while, before quietly giving his answer.

“That might be part of their plan. It would be best not to do anything careless at this stage. We intercept them as planned.”

“How boring, Rosenberg. You’re such a spineless person.”

It was a provocative statement. But there was no response. Alice laughed lightly.

“In that case, you’re all dismissed. They’re moving according to how I foresaw it— so each of you, feel free to intercept them on your own terms. Also everyone, do your best not to get injured.”

With each knight in tow, Rosenberg and Schneider both left the hall. Behind them, the twins bounced out of the room, their knights following them as well.

Which left Alice and Shin as the only ones left in the hall.

(6)

Darkness was settling upon the forest, and the light of the evening sun was filtering faintly through the tips of the branches.

As summer was drawing near, the days were growing longer. Even so, considering the time— It was past seven in the evening— the sun was already sinking westwards beneath the horizon.

“So, over here?”

Going over a map by the light of a lamp, Raishin looked up.

In front of him was a tall wall. Beyond that was an old research building. Peering through the cracks in the wall, he could see that the place had been long abandoned, and it was little more than moss-covered ruins by now.

“Uu... Here. Around the back.”

Frey took the lead. Behind her was Raishin, then Charl, and Loki walking in single file. Entering the ruins from the rear entrance, they headed for the incinerator. Coming to a halt in front of it, Raishin poked his lamp inside, illuminating its interior.

An iron grate had been inserted, which meant this had to be an entrance of some sort.

Frey pointed at the surroundings of the incinerator.

“There are a lot of footprints... here. Yaya’s scent is also here.”

The Garm types’ search had led them to this location.

The letter that had been on Raishin’s bed earlier— that was a note marking out this spot. After this morning’s incident, Frey had conducted her own investigation into the matter.

“Thanks, Frey. It’s because of you we can assault them like this.”

“Uu... we’re in the same boat anyway.”

Frey brushed it off like it was nothing. Still, her usually expressionless face had a slight tinge of joy on it. On the other hand, Charl became a little sullen.

“So what, are we supposed to enter an underground labyrinth now? We don’t know what’s going to happen if we do, right?”

Staring warily at the iron grate, Charl was oddly jumpy. It was possible she was frightened.

Frey thought for a moment, then tilted her head to one side.

“... Is it ok if we reveal ourselves?”

“Yeah, I think we’ve already been exposed anyway— what are you planning?”

“This...”

Frey got the Garm types to line up in front of the incinerator, then blew a whistle.

The Garm types began to howl in unison.

It looked like it wasn't just a simple howl. There was magic energy weaved into their sounds. Komurasaki's Yaegasumi lost its effect, and the Garm types lost their stealth.

Frey closed her eyes and placed her hands over her ears, concentrating deeply.

She did this for a few minutes. Taking the map from Raishin's hands, she began to scribble complicated figures onto it. It looked like she was doing some form of a rough sketch.

“Uu... This is what the inside looks like.”

“The inside... Wait, you can see inside!?”

Frey nodded. Raishin clicked his tongue in amazement.

“That's incredible. How do you do it?”

“Reflection of the sound waves... It's because I'm connected to these guys...”

“Connected...? Can you even do something like that?”

“How foolish, did you really not know that?”

Charl grew even grumpier, speaking in a sulky tone.

“For most competent puppeteers, something like sharing perceptions of automata under their control is essentially an easy thing to do. It's just that during this period, the puppeteer will be defenceless.”

For skilled puppeteers, it was possible for them to share a part of their automaton's perception. It was essentially a continuation of the old traditions where a familiar and its summoner shared a bond.

“Wow... It's not something I could have done. You're a great help, Frey.”

“I guess I'm just useless after all, aren't I!? Hmph!”

For some reason Charl was tearing up. Raishin was perplexed by her behaviour, when a voice cut in from the side.

“Save the idle chit-chat for latter. Based off the map, there are two entrances. Do we go in from the front?”

Loki scrutinised the map, speaking in a sharp tone.

Raishin's eye fell onto the map as well. The inside of the building looked complicated, like it was a maze. Furthermore, it seemed the incinerator was also another way in.

“... You're right. There's a risk of them sneaking Yaya out the back. We should split up. I'll take the front. Loki, I leave the back to you.”

“Don't order me around. You should go by the back, you idiot.”

“Stop trying to one-up me you idiot!”

“Uu... Don't fight!”

“The way I see it— Frey should go by the back.”

Sigmund, who was resting atop of Charl's head, spoke up.

The opinion of an elder was always valuable. Loki and Raishin both stopped arguing, turning to look at him.

“What do you mean, Sigmund?”

“You saw the Garm types’ sensor ability and spatial detection, right? It’s exactly for that reason—“

“Ah, I see. They can easily detect it if the enemy decides to flee, and there will be no concerns over getting ambushed. It would be better if Frey guard’s the rear entrance.”

Charl quickly caught onto Sigmund’s intentions, expressing them in words. Raishin nodded as well.

“So in that case, Loki should really take the rear entrance after all.”

“Don’t decide things on your own, you idiot.”

“In that case, what do you propose, dear Loki?”

“Hmph. If Surround Roar dropped out of the Night Party now, it would be disadvantageous to me.”

“So you’re going to the back, aren’t you!?”

“Stop barking like a little brat. If I may say so, I am a tolerant person but I don’t have time for little kids.”

“Why you...!”

Raishin began to tremble with anger. Charl hurriedly cut in, fidgeting while coughing very loudly and deliberately.

“I-i-in that case, I’ll go in from the front. Because that’s the only option left. There’s n-no other motive behind it.”

She was right. The front entrance was the combination of Charl and Raishin. Raishin pulled himself together.

“I’m counting on you, Sigmund.”

“Mm.”

“Eh? But... What about me...?”

While eyeing Charl, who had suddenly calmed down, with suspicion, Raishin turned to Frey.

“Be careful, Frey. You couldn’t kill that idiot Loki even if you tried, but if we were to lose you then everything will have been for naught.”

“Uu... Thank you.”

“Who’re you calling an idiot, you idiot. You’re the one who couldn’t die even if they tried killing you. Your brain must be made up of noble gas.”

“Are you spoiling for a fight now!? Your brain is made up of mercury!” Your brain is made up of heavy metals!”

“Don’t fight!”

Frey interceded, and Raishin and Loki both clicked their tongues. In any case, they were splitting up into two teams, and each team prepared to advance along their respective routes.

“Let’s go, Charl. You clear on what to do, Irori?”

Raishin called out to the person behind him.

Hidden in the darkness, the silver haired girl who had remained silent up till now nodded frankly.

“In that case, it’s time to storm the crusaders’ castle.”

Raishin grinned, kicking down the iron grate.

Chapter 5 – Interception

(1)

Shouko was seated in a comfy chair, pipe in hand as she stared at the evening sun about to burn out.

Her view of the setting sun was blocked by the sudden appearance of someone at her windowsill.

It was a lone woman, clad in a black hooded mantle.

“I didn’t expect we would meet again like this. Good day, Karyuusai— oh, my apologies, from the way you look it seems your day has been anything but good.”

“Indeed. Especially now, I’m in the most terrible of moods.”

“Is it my fault? I apologise if so.”

“No, it’s because of that incorrigible boy. He’s gotten himself mixed up in something yet again...”

She slammed her pipe down in irritation. The ash flew out of the bowl, dirtying the floor.

After that, she gave an intimate smile at her visitor.

“Welcome, Professor Kimberly. What kind of house visit is this, dropping by unannounced through the window without even so much as a hello?”

“I apologise for my discourtesy. There were several extenuating circumstances on my part as well.”

“I wonder what the thugs gathered out front are doing?”

“Don’t say it like that. They’re all first rate puppeteers, I’ll have you know. Therefore, for them to have a mage that’s on a level above first rate as their opponent is somewhat cruel.”

“Fufu... So, what does the above first rate mage want with a third world puppeteer?”

“Just paying the great Karyuusai a visit. Think of this as a courtesy call.”

“At this hour, and without prior appointment? I wish you’d consider the time and place more properly.”

“Obviously, it goes without saying that I did.”

As if on cue, there was the sound of an explosion behind Kimberly.

Chunks of the building were blown away, and dust was stirred up. There was no smell of gunpowder, and there was no flash of light either. This wasn’t caused by conventional explosives. This was a magic art!

The sounds of screams and angry yells could be heard. It seemed the puppeteers on security detail were scrambling into action.

“... What’s going on?”

“It would seem that a bunch of far ruder individuals have arrived.”

“An attack...? Komurasaki, come!”

She called out to someone outside the room... but there was no response.

In place of the puzzled Shouko, Kimberly called out to someone outside the window.

“Come on in. Your mistress is calling you.”

In response to that, a girl came flying up, albeit stiffly and with some difficulty.

Wearing a kimono that was the colour of the autumn leaves, her hair was tied up in two tails on either side of her head. Compared to her regular expression, she had a darker look on her face. Still, it was undoubtedly Komurasaki’s face.

Staring through her eye-patch, Shouko let out an enormous sigh.

“Just what.... Are you thinking, boy...!?”

With a look of disbelief on her face, she muttered those words while adjusting the lens on her eyepatch. Sweeping the room, she could see through the walls, which let her watch the battle unfold.

“There are four puppeteers and four puppets... Oh my, it would appear the military are treating them as children. To attack a person of importance from another country without a formal declaration of war, how outrageous. Isn't there a brave crusader out there who will come gallantly to rescue this pitiable puppeteer?”

“Nectar are just cowardly bystanders. Our goal is to watch and observe—unfortunately, all I can do is just watch.”

Kimberly spoke bluntly. Seeing Shouko in such a predicament seemed to give her some pleasure.

The sound of the ongoing fight was drawing nearer. The sound of an attacked resonated throughout the building from directly beneath them, and a cry of agony could be heard. It seemed yet another puppeteer on security detail had been defeated.

Immediately after, the floor exploded, and an automaton came bursting through.

(2)

Raishin walked through the dark passage, guided by the light of the lamp.

Right behind him was Charl and Sigmund, while behind them was a blue kimono—Irori's figure bringing up the rear.

In the first place, this seemed to be a facility for experiments that couldn't be shown to the public. The underground passages twisted and turned in a complicated manner, making the whole place very uncanny.

“Ah, geez, what's with this dampness!?”

Charl grumbled. She was very concerned about her hair.

“Forget your hair, pay more attention to your feet. There might be traps we don’t know about.”

“Hmph, you’re such an idiot. By saying something like that, you’re practically begging for a trap to appear right this moment—“

Abruptly, Charl’s body plummeted. Right after saying that, a trap had appeared!

She fell rapidly. Grabbing firmly onto her unexpectedly slim wrist, he pulled her up.

His ribs groaned under the effort, and cold sweat started pouring out. Fortunately, Charl was fine. The floorboards snapped back, reversing back to their original position, closing the trap shut again.

It looked like a trap hole that had been used countless times. There was a strange light coming from below, and something akin to a body of water could be seen. It was quite a sharp drop. If she had fallen through it, it might have even killed her.

Charl slumped onto the floor, her face a pale shade of white. Raishin chuckled wryly.

“It looks like your words had more power to set off the trip flag, not mine.”

“... Raishin. Saying something like that is an invitation for another trap.”

Just as Sigmund finished speaking, there was a loud click; something had been set in motion.

What mechanism had been set off was obvious in an instant. From the end of the corridor, a large torrent of water came rushing their way!

“Charl!”

“Leave it to me! Lustre Cannon!”

Sigmund opened his jaw, blasting the torrent with a flood of light.

The surge of water was dissipated magnificently, splashing everywhere as it was scattered about. However, the stream of water continued unbroken, a second wave of water following from behind. The water level was rising— at this rate, they were going to drown!

“Charl, aim for the floor!”

Sigmund immediately aimed his neck downwards. Charl didn’t understand anything, but she fired off a second shot nonetheless. Piercing through the surging waters, the torrent of light burst through the floor.

As Raishin had hoped, a hole opened up. At the same time, something unexpected happened as well.

The large volume of water poured down into the hole, but both Charl and Raishin were dragged along with the undertow.

They fell through the hole. Falling from a great height, they hit the water’s surface with a crash.

Just as he had seen earlier, they were in a pool. Raishin hurriedly tried to get his bearings. Relying on light coming from other sources, he swam towards what he thought was the surface.

Halfway up, he saw Charl, who was trashing about. Grabbing onto her, he swam for dear life, finally breaking the surface. The moment he did however, he got an elbow from her.

“Where do you think you’re touching, you pervert!”

“Where... Your stomach?”

“That’s my chest! How dare you, you... Uwaaaah!”

Raishin had stepped on a landmine. Charl started wailing on him with her tiny fists. Fighting the impulse to leave her alone, he started looking for some sort of land he could swim towards.

“Over here, Raishin. There’s a manmade island.”

Sigmund flew overhead, guiding him towards the island. Following Sigmund’s directions, there was a landmass made of stone smack in the middle of the pool.

There was a kimono clad girl already on it, and she helped pull Raishin up.

“Raishin. Are you... ok?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

The truth was his ribs hurt from the impact of crashing into the water, but he didn’t show it on his face, looking around to confirm his surroundings instead.

The pool was large. Two academy gymnasiums could have fit inside. The ceiling was high up, and water was still flowing down from the hole they had blown up earlier. The island they were on divided the pool exactly in half, and in the middle of the island there was an area the size of two tennis courts—

Four people were standing there.

“They fell down!”

“Yeah, they fell down!”

“Aren’t they a klutz!?”

“Yup yup, so klutzy!”

There were a pair of girls giggling.

Behind them, their knights stood there with spears in hand.

“Hmph... they’ve made their presence known quickly enough.”

Charl wrung her skirt, which was dripping wet, speaking in a confident voice.

“I’ll make you regret showing your face before me!”

(3)

There was a rumble echoing throughout the ground, causing Yaya to lift her head.

There was a tingling sensation on her skin as she felt a wave of magic energy. There was no mistaking it. There was a battle going on somewhere.

At that moment, the door opened with a click, and someone entered without as much as a knock.

“A-Alice! What’s going on?”

“Raishin Akabane has come to see you.”

Yaya sprang to her feet. However, before she take even a single step, Alice had gripped Yaya’s shoulder firmly, holding her back. She was remarkably strong, possessing a strength belying her gender.

“You’re not supposed to leave. Where do you think you’re going?”

“Obviously, Yaya is going to where Raishin is...”

“And what then?”

“Well...”

“Well, I don’t mind letting you go see him.”

“Really?”

“But only if you have the confidence to tell him goodbye with your own words.”

Yaya was paralysed like she had been struck by a bolt of lightning.

Tears began to stream down her face.

That— that was right. She had decided to part with him. Parting was all for Raishin’s sake in the first place...

“Don’t cry. Think about all the happiness that’s about to come your way.”

Alice spoke gently, like she was trying to pacify a child.

“Maybe telling you Raishin was coming was a little too cruel? But I’ll have you know, I have faith in you. Your strength is magnificent— Even enemy countries’— automata cannot restrain you”

“... I’m sorry.”

“If he tells you to go back with him, your resolve will be shaken. In fact, you might even succumb and return with him. If you do so however, know that misfortune will befall you once more.”

Yaya buried her face in her hands, continuing to sob.

“You don’t have to be worried, we had no intention of inflicting further harm on him. The reason for this— Raishin has the doll of snow with him.”

Her voice was gentle— but her words were as sharp as needles.

The expression on Yaya’s face crumbled. Alice smiled sweetly, piling on even further.

“If he had brought you along, we would have held nothing back to eliminate him, because you are weak. However, since he has the doll of snow with him now, we can’t afford to do that.”

“... ”

“I know what he wants. He’s going to ask us to return you.”

“—!”

“That’s right, he’s charging headfirst into an enemy’s base to retrieve you. Don’t you think he’s putting his life in danger because of you again?”

I’m putting Raishin’s life at risk again...

Yaya choked back another sob, before inquiring of Alice in a trembling voice.

“Raishin... What are you planning to do with Raishin?”

“Nothing bad. If possible, I would like him to be our ally, at least that is what I personally think.”

“A-ally...?”

“That’s right. If that happens, you’ll be able to be with him once again, right?”

Yaya’s pupils widened visibly.

“Together... together.... We can be... together....”

Yaya seemed to have latched on to something, repeating the same words over and over again.

Alice drew Yaya towards her in an embrace, softly whispering the final blow.

“Once he uses the doll of snow to defeat Magnus, you’ll be able to be by his side, and we will obtain the Wiseman’s throne. Everyone will be happy, right?”

“Everyone...?”

“That’s right. For that reason— You can endure it, can’t you Yaya?”

Yaya’s expression faded till she was like a blank doll as she slowly nodded her head.

Alice left Yaya’s room, and waiting for her outside in the corridor with a pensive face was Shin.

Alice walked on, unconcerned. An illumination magic tool lit up the corridor, revealing it to be swept spotless. Standing diagonally to the left behind her, Shin followed his mistress silently.

“Do you have something you want to say, Shin?”

“My lady’s spirit might be warped like the twisting of the intestines, but the control the doll of the moon with words alone... is dangerous.”

“I can’t say I approve of eavesdropping.”

“Remonstrating with a mistress’s foolhardiness is also the duty of a butler.”

“You have some nerve calling it foolhardiness. A genius like myself has her completely entrapped.”

“The stench of your overwhelming self-confidence is as repugnant as always, but do you really plan on putting the fatherland in danger just because of your wretched hubris and deplorable hedonism?”

“Ok, Shin. I’ll make you cry later.”

“I very much feel like crying now.”

“Dear dear. First Rosenberg, now you? Everyone is such a worrywart.”

“My lady is being too bold. I fear you may end up with egg on your face.”

“That’s just a polite way of saying I’m going to look like a fool. There’s no need to worry. I have the doll of the moon completely under control— body, heart and soul.”

“Even so, I feel it would be prudent to use some form of physical restraint. That room might be shielded from magic energy, but it can be destroyed from within.”

“Physical restraints? Is that cowardice I’m detecting, Mark 4?”

Alice turned to look at him, cold contempt in her eyes.

“Think back to the earlier battle. You managed to push Raishin and the T-Rex back singlehandedly. Furthermore, right now I’m controlling you, aren’t I? There’s no logically way we can lose.”

“But we have split up our forces on our side as well. On top of that, my lady’s objective is...”

“Oh? You seem rather displeased. Is it regarding bring Raishin to our side?”

“Yes. I may be skilled at being the butler of the Bernstein family, but if I had to name a flaw, I am deeply religious. Just this morning, I had a dream of my dead mother.”

“Deeply religious... That might be the best joke I’ve heard from you in a while.”

“Please, reconsider. Raishin Akabane is a dangerous individual.”

Alice suddenly came to a halt.

Turning around, she brought a hand brimming with magic energy to Shin’s cheek.

The upper half of Shin’s body shook violently, a red bruise forming. Alice had exerted forced control over Shin, using magic energy so he couldn’t resist, thus forcing him to take the full impact of the slap.

“I’m a greedy person, Shin. I want everything— then I want to destroy it all.”

She pinched Shin’s cheek like she wanted to tear it off. The skin on his cheek split, and red blood began to ooze out.

Alice pushed Shin away.

“Now, go. Bring him here to the hall.”

“... As you wish.”

Blood trickling down his cheek, Shin reverently bowed in deference.

Gliding through the air, he flew towards the end of the corridor.

Watching him disappear, Alice giggled happily.

Her giggling lasted for a while.

While continuing to laugh, she walked away. Her footsteps were elegant but somehow, there was a touch of sadness about it.

(4)

Looking back and forth between the two girls, Charl muttered softly under her breath.

“Those two are the Weizsäcker twins. They’re a couple of irritating, frivolous students whom you can never tell apart— but they’re strong. In all the two on two mock battles conducted at the academy, they’re the strongest pair amongst the third years.”

“Third years... They’re our... seniors?”

Reflexively, he threw a piercing gaze over in their direction.

Their bodies, their gestures, their expressions— no matter how he looked at them he concluded they had to be at least five years his junior.

“Ah! He’s doubting us! He’s thinking we’re just kids!”

“Yeah, he is! He just looked at us funny!”

“Maybe we should show him our womanly charms?”

“Yeah, yeah, let’s show him!”

The twins gave each other a high five, before suddenly lifting their blouses up.

Charl was taken aback. Waving her arms about, she flusteredly blocked Raishin’s field of vision.

“W-w-what are you doing!? Don’t look you pervert! Sex offender!”

“Why are you calling me the pervert!? Don’t treat me like a sex offender!”

The twins gave a carefree laugh, putting their clothes back on.

“So? Pretty womanly right?”

“Full of sex appeal, right, right?”

“Well, they’re certainly bigger than Charl—“

Midway through his sentence, Raishin was sent flying through the air, tumbling into the pool.

Looking back, he saw Charl on the verge of saying something. The edges of her eyes were filled with tears, and even though those tears weren’t frozen, they had an uncanny degree of coldness in them.

Raishin clambered unsteadily back onto solid ground, facing the twins who were still smiling merrily.

As he thought, they were just children. On top of that—

Ever since earlier he had been straining his senses, but he couldn’t detect any hostility from them. Sigmund seemed to have noticed it too; he was observing the twins intently with a prudent look in his eyes.

“By the way, you two... Do you really enjoy killing?”

The twins were stumped by the sudden question, staring at each other.

“Do you like dissecting frogs? Does the sight of blood get you excited? Do you have an interest in gouging out eyeballs, digging out intestines, sawing off bone—“

As Raishin spoke, the twins visibly turned pale, starting to tremble with fear.

“J-J-Japanese people sound barbaric.”

“Yeah, b-b-barbaric. And brutal.”

They stared at Raishin like he was some kind of monster. Raishin felt let down. He thought that under their innocent façade, they would be cold killing machines. If they really were that pure... perhaps he could just talk to them?

“Hey, where’s Yaya? I don’t want to fight you two. Just tell me where she is.”

“... Telling you is a no-no, ok?”

“Yup, yup, we can’t say. Or else Rosenberg will get mad at us!”

The twins turned to face Raishin simultaneously.

“”Not gonna tell ya!”

Raishin scratched his head, then took out the rough sketch Frey had given him, which unfortunately was now soaked.

“Is this— the innermost room?”

“”Not gonna tell ya!”

“In that case, this here— this smaller room that’s connected here and looks like some kind of hall. Is this it?”

“”N-n-not gonna tell ya!”

Their reaction was ridiculously easy to read.

“Thanks. You’ve saved me a ton of bother. Let’s hurry, Irori—“

“”You can’t—!”

The twins ran in front of Raishin in a panic. The two knights wielding spears moved in splendid synchrony, crossing their spears to bar the path of Raishin and his partner.

“No means no!”

“That’s right, you can’t!”

For some reason, the twins looked like they were on the verge of crying.

As mad as they were, Raishin felt that brushing them aside with brute force would be awkward.

“Can’t we come to some sort of compromise...?”

“You’re such an idiot. Isn’t the solution simple? — We just have to eliminate them if they stand in our way.”

Charl spoke coldly. There was a dangerous look in her eyes.

She began to focus a large amount of magic energy. Sigmund opened his mouth, and a flash of light shot out from his throat.

“Ah, hey, wait a minute!”

“If you want to curse something, curse your own chests! Lustre Canon!”

A beam burst forth from the dragon’s jaw. It was like canon blast made out of light. Its destructive power was fearsome enough, being able to annihilate anything in its path, and right now it assailed the twins and their knights.

However, the knights remained standing in position with their spears crossed, not even bothering to dodge. The Lustre Canon was about to swallow them whole—but just before that, it made a U-turn.

The beam was reflected back at them. Grazing past Charl, it burnt off the tip of the hat.

That was an extremely close call. If the beam’s aim had been off even slightly, Charl would have ceased to exist in this world.

“They... reflected it...!?”

Raishin's eyes widened in surprise. What was the meaning of this? Even Shin didn't have that sort of ability. Was it possible that their automata wasn't the same model as Shin's....!?

"The T-Rex looks shocked!"

"She does, she does! Bet she wet her pants!"

"W-w-w-who wet their pants!? Don't say weird things!"

"Calm down, Charl! You're not making any sense here!"

Raishin hastily cut in, and Charl sullenly closed her mouth shut.

(These two barely formed any magic energy earlier...)

Without any concentration, without any visible command, they had somehow managed to be completely in tune with each other, controlling the two automata, activating a magic art, and reflecting the cannon blast.

"Those two might have personality flaws, but they're definitely superb puppeteers. Plus it's obvious this is a bad match up for you. We should retreat for now, and formulate a plan."

"Don't be ridiculous. I am Charlotte of the house of Belew. Do you think I'll just lick my wounds and retreat when I'm being looked down upon?"

Charl's expression still had some complacency in it. Perhaps she had some kind of plan?

"You go on ahead. I'll stay here and stall them."

"Huh!? You idiot, look at the situation! There are two of them! How are you going to fight them alone—"

"Idiot!? Did you call me an idiot!? The one who calls others an idiot is the true idiot!"

“Charl’s right, Raishin.”

Sigmund spoke in a calm voice.

“You’re the one who should be looking at the situation. If we dawdle here, it gives them more time to flee with Yaya. Furthermore— right now you’re nothing more than a hindrance.”

Raishin ground his teeth. As vexing as it was, Sigmund was absolutely right.

“You don’t have to worry. Charl’s constant distress and need of rescue she displays in front of you is no more than an act.”

“Who are you accusing of acting!?”

“She’s a puppeteer who’s far more splendid than you think she is. The label of the Rounds isn’t just for show.”

Raishin was conflicted. It was true he wanted to get Yaya as quickly as possible. Furthermore, now that they had broken in, he didn’t want to give them any more time to prepare if he could help it.

“... I got it. I’ll leave them to you. Let’s go, Irori.”

Raishin reached for his belt, taking out a circular container from a pouch attached to it.

Pulling the pin, he threw it at his feet.

The gunpowder was a little damp, but nevertheless it managed to light up without a problem. Dense clouds of black smoke billowed out, rapidly blocking everyone’s field of vision. Slipping into the smokescreen, Raishin dashed away.

“Eh, what happened?!”

“What, what!?”

Bypassing the confused twins, he succeeded in breaking through them.

(Be safe, Charl!)

Offering a silent prayer, Raishin left the pool behind.

(5)

Slashing away at the undergrowth, Cherubim advanced forward.

Following behind were Loki, Frey, and her five dogs.

After continuing onwards for a short while, the grove of trees suddenly opened up, and their field of vision was clear.

In front of them was what a semi-circular area, which made them think of one of those olden amphitheatres.

There was no way this could be an amphitheatre though... so maybe it used to be a testing ground for magic arts?

“It looks like the entrance is over there.”

Loki stared at the stage area of the amphitheatre, where there was a gaping hole present.

Suddenly turning way, Loki stepped out of the trees.

“We’ll intercept them. Spread the dogs. We’ll hold our position here.”

“Uu... We’re not going inside?”

“I’m not going to blindly charge in. For you and me both, fighting outdoors is more advantageous.”

“But... What if they don’t come out?”

“They definitely will.”

Loki asserted firmly. Frey cocked her head to the side, unable to follow his logic.

“Use your head. Once we join up with the others again, our battle strength will rise exponentially. It is right now, when the Sword Emperor and T-Rex are split up, that is the best time for them to attack.”

Frey nodded in understanding. Loki’s expression clouded over.

“If I were in their shoes, then the most dangerous of the lot would be Shin— and he would be lying in wait for Raishin at their headquarters, which means Rosenberg would be the one coming here. Furthermore, Cherubim can’t cut through his automaton.”

Suddenly noticing Loki’s clouded expression on the profile of his face, Frey was startled.

“Now, if you finally understand scatter the dogs. Have them lie in wait within the trees.

While being told what to do, Frey instructed the Garm types to take up their positions. They formed a semi-circle, surrounding the amphitheatre.

Assuming even if the enemy was surprised by having their rear attacked and fled the amphitheatre, ultimately they would still be in the line of concentrated fire. Sonic bullets didn’t have much of an effect, overwhelming the enemy with countless bullets would ensure some eventually pierced through. That much had been proven earlier during Raishin and Shin’s fight.

A strategy befitting Loki’s intellect. Just as the tension began to lift from Frey’s shoulders,

“Guh... Uwoooooaaahhh!”

The scruff of Loki’s neck’s suddenly split open, and blood began to spurt out of the wound.

“Damn it... At a time like this?!”

Loki frantically clutched at his left breast.

Frey instinctively knew what had happened. His heart was going out of control!

Frey herself had undergone the traumatic experience before. Once the limiter was released, blood, flesh, and the internal organs were all forcibly converted, providing a near infinite supply of magic energy for use.

(Now that I think about it...!)

Earlier that afternoon, she had seen the wound on Loki's back after Schneider's attack.

That wasn't just a flesh wound— perhaps his heart had already started acting up since then!

Loki let out a scream of anguish, falling onto his knees.

Blood continued to spray out of him. Frey couldn't bear the sight any longer, and she came to a decision.

“Loki... I'm sorry about this!”

She blew her whistle, summoning the Garm types back.

Channeling her magic energy into them, the Garm types started to howl. Their howl was laced with magic energy, distorting the atmosphere. A wave of air eventually undulated out, and at the same time, Loki began to spasm.

He stretched out his hand upwards— then collapsed onto the floor.

Having directly assaulted his eardrums with sound, this destabilised Loki's brain, eventually causing him to pass out.

Loki's heart finally calmed down. His magic energy stopped leaking out, and his pulse slowed as well.

Relieved, Frey gently and tenderly stroked Loki's back.

His tendons hadn't completely healed yet. The various slash wounds inflicted by their step-father Bronson were still there. All these wounds were the result of Loki protecting the Garm types and his sister.

"Thank you, Loki..."

Suddenly, the dogs' ears all shot up.

At the worst possible timing, someone's footsteps could be heard coming from the exit.

"Uu... Cherubim!"

Frey turned to Cherubim, an entreating look on her face.

Cherubim didn't respond, staring intently at its master who was still lying on the ground.

Its operational capacity had plunged tremendously. As it was constructed with inorganic materials—which meant it wasn't a Bandoll—its master's loss of consciousness meant that Cherubim wasn't able to battle. Furthermore, Frey had no idea if she was even able to reach the puppet in the first place.

However, she didn't give up.

"Cherubim. I'm leaving Loki to you... Please protect him!"

The lights representing its eyes slowly moved, landing onto Frey.

[hmm... Yes... Yes, I'm ready.]

It seemed it understood her.

Frey was relieved for a moment, then she pulled herself together.

Running out of the undergrowth, she headed towards the amphitheatre without even so much as a plan.

Eventually, two male students, along with their knights in tow, appeared out of the exit.

The one in front threw something into the air.

Shooting upwards like a bullet, it hung overhead and started to illuminate the surrounding area. It was probably a searchlight, or a magic tool that gave off a similar luminescent effect. While it did fully expose Frey's position, on the flipside, the brightness of the tool meant that the two students were easily identifiable.

Honey blonde hair which belonged to Rosenberg, and flaming red hair that belonged to Schneider.

Behind them were a small and slender knight holding an enormous tower shield, and a tall and lean knight holding a large claymore.

Rosenberg turned his searching gaze into the direction of Frey.

"I don't see the Sword Emperor around."

"He's probably hiding around somewhere in the vicinity."

Schneider vigilantly scanned his surroundings. Rosenberg turned his head to face him.

"Nay— His presence I do not sense. Therefore, I now pose a question to thee, Surround Roar."

The minute he turned his eyes back onto Frey, every hair on her body stood on end.

"Even as careless as thou art can possibly be, surely you do not intend to face us alone?"

Her knees were shaking uncontrollably. Her legs felt like they were going to give way. Mustering all her willpower, Frey shouted out.

“Everyone!”

The Garm types howled in response, firing off five bullets of air.

The sound waves generated were gathered by magic energy, compacted densely, and given rotation. The sonic bullet had the destructive power of a drill as it barrelled forward towards the enemy.

The blasts from the five dogs resonated with each other, coalescing and focusing the power into a single shot that smashed into the enemy.

The blast was comparable to a shot from a battleship’s main gun. The shockwave it generated ripped through the floor of the amphitheatre, throwing up a large amount of sand into the air. The blast hit, causing a cloud of dust to hang in the air. However, once the dust settled—

Standing there was the small knight with its large tower shield in hand.

It was absolutely unharmed. There wasn’t a single blemish on the face of the shield!

Rosenberg stared down at Frey, speaking in an icy tone.

“Can I take that as a declaration of war?”

The blood drained from her face. Just as she started to look for an escape route, she noticed something.

Standing behind Rosenberg was Schneider, but next to Schneider— there was no one!

The next instant, a claymore came swinging down on Frey’s defenceless back.

(6)

Deeper and deeper he went, determinedly heading further into the heart of the building.

Raishin ran down the labyrinth tunnels, guided by the map he was holding in hand.

At some point, the brightness in the vicinity increased, making his lamp unnecessary.

(Yaya... Wait for me, Yaya!)

He was about to reach his goal, one of the rooms.

“You’ve been pretty silent. What’s the matter, Irori?”

While sprinting forward, he called out to the person behind him. However, there was no reply. His temporary partner just looked at him with an uneasy look on her face.

Raishin perfectly understood the reason why she was feeling the way she was feeling at the moment.

Raishin took the map he was holding and pressed it into her white hands.

“If push comes to shove, you should escape.”

“—Eh?”

“If it’s just you alone, you should be able to escape easily. After I transfer magic energy to you, use your magic art and head straight for the exit. If you get serious, they won’t be able to catch you at all— Watch out!”

Raishin suddenly grabbed her and dove sideways.

Near the area where Raishin had been standing a moment earlier, a sudden gust of wind blew in.

Of course, it wasn’t just a simple gust. There was someone there along with the wind.

It was someone who had the demeanour of a butler. With tinted glasses and his hair swept back, he had a graceful appearance, but at the same time he gave off the air of a ferocious shark. Obviously, that could only be—

“Yo, Shin. Don’t you think you should look where you’re going?”

“My apologies. I couldn’t see your figure, so my sense of distance was thrown off slightly.”

“You liar. Komurasaki’s magic art should have been dispelled long ago. You should have been able to see us as clearly as crystal.”

“I suppose that is true, seeing as I can see you now as we speak.”

There wasn’t even a hint of a smile on his face as he answered flatly. Raishin was so outraged he went past anger and ended up chuckling wryly.

Shin stared at Raishin and the girl behind him, speaking with a retort.

“I’m afraid I cannot commend you on your unlawful entry into the premises, Mister Akabane. While this is a school building, currently this area itself is off limits to students. Furthermore—“

“This is the Kreuzritter’s base, right?”

“Exactly. Even wild animals know how to respect another’s territory.”

“My bad. But it wasn’t locked, so I ended up coming in.”

Raishin fired back a retort of his own, before looking behind Shin.

“Where’s that pretty lady who’s always with you?”

“I wonder... Where indeed?”

“Stop putting on airs. If Irori were to fight you now, there’s no way you could hope to pull off any sort of revenge. Without your puppeteer to help you, you don’t have a chance at victory.”

“That is perfectly clear to me. However, I will say this. ‘If I were to be destroyed, the doll of the moon would be destroyed as well.’”

“Such a cliché. Makes me want to vomit.”

“This kind of threat is more effective on people like you. That’s what my lady, whose character is completely depraved, knows very well.”

It was true. With such a threat looming overhead, there was nothing Raishin could do now.

While Raishin hesitated, Shin shrugged his shoulders.

“You don’t have the luxury of that choice anyway. If we were to fight now, it would be my victory.”

“That’s quite the confidence you have there, considering what you went through the last time.”

“I’ve already seen your trump card, and besides, that last battle—“

“You weren’t fighting seriously, is that what you want to say?”

“It is as you say.”

Shin spoke without hesitation. It looked like he was speaking the truth; he had held back during their last encounter.

If that was the case— why lose in the first place? Was there some reason to lose?

“Be that as it may, you have nothing to worry about now. I do not harbour any thoughts of starting a fight here.”

“As always, you have that roundabout way of speaking.”

“Mister Akabane. I would like you to come with me, alone. The doll behind you may choose to flee. I promise you I will not give chase.”

“... Tell me one thing.”

“What is it?”

“Is Yaya ok?”

“Yes. We have been treating her with nothing but the finest hospitality.”

“You haven’t restrained her forcefully, have you?”

“No. We have left her to her own devices.”

“What?”

Raishin couldn’t believe his ears. Then he couldn’t believe whether what Shin had said was the truth.

Was Yaya really... not restrained at all?

If so, why hadn’t she tried to escape?

(... Wait, there might be some truth to that.)

During the afternoon, when he had met her in the middle of the woods, Yaya hadn’t been restrained or captured against her will.

“Oh boy. Just what kind of magic did you use to ensnare Yaya’s heart like that?”

“That’s a question you should be posing to yourself, no?”

“__“

“Isn’t the cause of the whole affair your inability to command her effectively?”

At that moment, Raishin understood.

I see... So that was it.

With Shin's words, he understood. He could more or less piece together the series of events that had transpired.

He knew why Yaya had gone to them.

And why she hadn't returned.

Why Shin had specifically lost to Irori. In other words—

Raishin let out a huge sigh, then started laughing wryly.

“Your mistress is really... her character is warped, but I'll admit it. She is an amazing lady.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“No, I'm being honest. To be able to manipulate Yaya—to be able to manipulate other people the way she does.”

It was the opposite with Charl's situation. This time, she didn't use a hostage, but had slipped into the gap in Yaya's own heart.

“Yaya wasn't forcibly taken from me. She left on her own volition. Then you pretended to lose to Irori on purpose, to further manipulate her heart. So in other words...”

Seething with anger he had no outlet for, Raishin glared at Shin.

“By showing her how powerless she was, you inserted the thought that Irori was a better fitting partner for me.”

In all his battles so far, Raishin had always fought while wounded to varying degrees.

That was something that Yaya had been worried about. It was something she had always blamed herself for, and always apologised to Raishin for. Even though Yaya was beside him, and in spite of her being beside him, he had always ended up being wounded.

My weakness is the cause of everything.

(Yaya... I'm sorry...!)

Raishin took a deep breath, then resolutely lifted his head up.

“Irori, go back.”

He could hear the sharp intake of breath behind him.

“Shouko will kill me if I lose two of the Setsugetsuka. Return to the surface while they're willing to let you escape.”

“—But!”

“Go back. Thanks for accompanying me this far.”

She stared at Raishin intently, with an unbearably sad look on her face. After that, she forcibly turned around, running down the tunnel which they had come from.

Shin didn't pursue, instead staring at Raishin like he was assessing him, before offering a hand.

“In that case, let us be off. Mister Akabane, if you would.”

“Right.”

Holding onto Raishin's arm, Shin smoothly glided up into the air. He started to fly with remarkable stability. Even though the narrow corridors had several right angled turns and bends, Raishin wasn't jerked by any inertia at all.

Eventually, Shin landed in a hall.

“Make yourself at home, Mister Akabane. I will go prepare tea now.”

Releasing Raishin violently, Shin spoke curtly.

Raishin tumbled onto the concrete, completing a full revolution before standing up. As he coughed, he endured the sharp pain in his ribs, taking a look around at his surroundings.

He was in a large hall. The ceiling was really high up. It had to be at least three stories tall.

Scarlet drapes were hung on the walls, and there was a flag with a lion on it that was up on the walls as well.

And then, right in the middle of the hall.

“... Well that was easy. I thought I’d have to go through numerous traps, but I didn’t think they’d guide me directly to her.”

There was a round table made of wood, and there was a lone girl sitting there.

Raishin tentatively took a few steps towards her. Shin didn’t seem to care, and he stepped out of the hall.

Raishin was now alone with her, albeit a little too easily.

Raishin stared at the round table, then turned towards the girl with black hair, before sighing.

“... I’ve been looking for you.”

Those large eyes were filled with immense sorrow, as if the end of the world had arrived.

Raishin’s image was reflected in those jet black eyes as the girl stared at him sadly—

It was Yaya.

Chapter 6 – Everything has Become a Lie

(1)

Raishin stared at the black-haired girl, taking step after step as he drew closer.

Surprised, she retreated, shouting at him.

“Don’t come any closer!”

“Don’t say that. I deliberately came all the way here after all. You too deliberately showed me your face because you wanted to talk to me, isn’t that right—“

He smiled.

“Alice Bernstein.”

“Raishin, what are you talking about? Yaya doesn’t understand...”

“Your acting is really top-notch. However, no matter how good you fake it, it’s useless. I lied earlier. Komurasaki’s Yaegasumi is still in effect.”

“__“

“You see, Yaegasumi can be targeted specifically. The radius of the stealth and who can or cannot see through it can be controlled. I asked Komurasaki to target Yaya. In other words— the real Yaya shouldn’t be able to see me at all.”

Since she could still sense Raishin, it meant she wasn’t Yaya.

The black haired girl began to giggle and laugh.

“... I never thought it could be used like that.”

Sparks scattering, the illusion vanished, revealing a youth’s face underneath.

It was the heir to the Granville family, the executive committee chairman Cedric.

“If you had that up your sleeve, why did you still accept my invitation?”

“I want to speak to the real Yaya.”

“That’s all? You really must not value your life.”

“I do value my life. However, I guessed if I went along quietly, you wouldn’t kill me.”

“Oh? Why?”

“Your butler told me. There’s value in capturing the last member of the Akabane clan alive— In order to create god.”

There was a look of surprise on the face of Cedric.

There was silence while they both tried to read each other’s’ intentions. Tension began to build, the air turning strained.

There was the sound of someone’s coarse footsteps echoing. Shin had returned with a tea set.

Cedric laughed, inviting Raishin to have a seat at the round table.

“Let’s have tea. I’ve been wanting to have a nice, long chat with you.”

“I’ll consider it if you drop that face and show me your true beauty, how about it?”

“Hoho, you really are a lady-killer. I guess the rumours about you being a Lothario are true after all?”

“Those are all lies, ok? My reputation has been damaged because of all those rumours, you know?”

“Then, is this face simply not to your liking?”

“It’s not your real face.”

“... I don’t know which my real face is anymore. No one does.”

A shadow passed over her face as she smiled. Although she said it was a matter of no importance, Cedric's visage gave way to the silver haired beauty.

Sitting down at the table, she beckoned him over.

Raishin took a deep breath, trying to calm his rapidly beating heart.

He was worried about Charl and Frey.

Rosenberg wasn't here. He was probably on his way to Frey now. While he was here entertaining this girl, there was a possibility that both Frey and Charl could be defeated.

However, he couldn't turn down Alice's invitation. Depending on how their conversation went, it was possible that he could draw closer to the enemy's true identity. It could also mean that he would be able to truly rescue Charl and Henri in every sense of the word.

Because of that, he obediently took a seat. Alice gave him a bright smile.

"What an honour. I'm glad you feel that way."

"It's only because of your compromise."

"Then consider this an extra bonus. I'll tell you something interesting. It's regarding the young master of the Granville household— he's already gone. From this earth."

"What? But Cedric was discovered to be under house arrest..."

"How do you know that was the real one?"

Enjoying Raishin's reactions, Alice teasingly paused halfway. Waiting for Shin to pour her a cup of black tea, she took a sip before continuing.

"While I am Alice Bernstein, at the same time I am also Cedric Granville. I've been both students all this time, ever since Alice entered the academy."

“... All this time?”

“I can’t tell you how troublesome it was. I had to study two people’s worth of curriculum. I had to use a double for attendance taking, and the exams were a hassle too. Even then, there were a lot of suspicious people inside the academy. A few of the professors felt that there was something wrong.”

Grinning broadly, she continued speaking happily.

“So I made an excuse that Alice was... sickly. Thanks to that I was able to take a lot of the exams as make up tests. As Shin was masquerading as the Granville butler, he couldn’t be seen in direct contact with Alice—“

“Cedric is dead, you said? Why the need for an imposter then?”

“It’s because I was exposed as one. The Kingsforts— In other words, England—“
Kingsfort. That name again. It was as if they linked by fate.

“If you remember the previous incident, it was revealed that we were controlling the Granville family. Thus, the Kingsforts being the Kingsforts, they prepared a substitute imposter. Ultimately, if it ever came to proving who the real one was it would be too troublesome, so we decided to just drop the Cedric mask.”

Hearing all that, Raishin was thrown into confusion.

Nothing made sense. What was the point of going to all those lengths? What was their goal? In fact, speaking of unknown goals, he had no idea what the Kingsforts’ goal was either.

“What’s going on here? In that case, why did you have to drag Charl into all this...?”

“Let me explain it step by step. Firstly, the Granvilles are one of the powerhouses of England, on par with the Kingsforts. At one point they were political opponents, but now they’re working towards the same goal. You could even say they’re close allies now.”

“So, Cedric was involved with the Cannibal Candy affair...?”

“A good deduction. Yes, he was an accomplice. After all, he was the chairman of the executive committee. With the disciplinary committee and the executive committee heads working in tandem, a lot of things could be done, right?”

“How revolting.”

“As Cedric Granville, I assisted Felix about halfway in.”

“But you weren’t the real Cedric.”

“Yes, I was the wolf in sheep’s clothing. While pretending to help, the ultimate goal was to sow discord between the Kingsfort, Granville, and the academy’s board of directors.”

“Discord... with the academy?”

“Did you know? The Kingsforts have been in contact with the headmaster, trying to win him over. Co-operation over research into that is what they’ve been dangling in order to grow this friendship.”

Alice narrowed her eyes suddenly, speaking to him like she was asking him a riddle.

“However, there are certain people who do not wish to see the academy and England getting along. Certain people out in the world.”

“... The German empire.”

“Exactly!”

She laughed happily. Alice placed her cup down, and brought her hands together as she rested her jaw on them.

“It was a good opportunity to cause a split between the academy and England. If the Granville’s young head broke their secret pact and exposed that thing, it would throw everyone and everything into turmoil. Feeling that the Kingsfort and

Granville were acting weird, it would sow the seeds of discord between the academy and England.”

“... What is that thing you keep referring to?”

Alice grinned mischievously, and asked him a question in place of an answer.

“Do you know what the greatest taboo for a magus is?”

“Creating a Bandoll?”

“Nope. It’s creating a human.”

“—!”

“That would be like stepping into the realm of god. Obviously, the Vatican wouldn’t stay quiet about something like that. However, magi are people who are obsessed with the illusion of progress. You can’t stop their research for the truth. It’s really problematic.”

That was right. Bronson, the head of D-Works, the one who had a hand in Loki and Frey, had said something like that.

Humanity is bound to reject stagnation and regression, and push forward in the name of progress—

As magi, they were obliged to contribute to that advance.

The truth was, human curiosity knew no bounds.

It was the reason why human civilisation was so rich. Compared to a hundred years ago, the standard of living had improved by leaps and bounds. The railroad, the steam engine, Machinart, all were invented to improve people’s lives.

“England, Germany, your country, the academy, the magi, everyone is working unanimously to create a human. Everyone wants to gain an edge over the rest and attain the skills of god.”

“That’s absurd. Why would they...”

“Romance, Raishin. All men are dreamers.”

She had a fawning tone in her voice. She flashed him a smile that was titillating and alluring.

“Should I speak in more pragmatic terms? A mechanical human is a far superior weapon than a regular soldier. You’ve seen Shin’s battle capabilities, right?”

“... That’s true.”

“And this is the point that distinguishes them from Bandolls. A Machine Doll can use an automaton.”

In other words, they could become magi.

In that case, they would really be—

“Yes, they would be an automaton while being a real human at the same time. If there were two Machine Dolls, they would be able to use each other. Do you realise the significance of that?”

“No...”

“It means the Magic Activity Dissonance Theory can be overcome.”

“—!”

“... or so it is thought. At the very least, there are hopes that there will be synergistic effect or some kind of resonance between magic arts. From that new circuits can be developed, new tactics for battle created. Problems that magi have not been able to solve might be solved at once. It would be the big bang of Machinart. A second Renaissance. Obviously this would cause a frenzy amongst magi.”

Pointing her finger at Raishin, Alice was filled with confidence as she continued.

“I will say this. The country that is able to create a complete Machine Doll will win the next world war, and will rule the world for the next millennia.”

Reeling from this blow, Raishin was rendered speechless temporarily.

It wasn't just about creating a man-made human.

The invention of Machine Dolls held far greater meaning than that.

Alice continued speaking like it was someone else's problem.

“Germany's progress has been quite remarkable. If the board of directors were shown the results of their progress, they would be shaken. Then they would be more inclined to co-operate with Germany instead, cutting off the academy's ties with England, aligning themselves with Germany instead... that's the whole scenario.”

“Impossible. Germany— You guys targeted the headmaster's life. There's no way the headmaster would agree to co-operate with the people who tried to assassinate him...”

“He would. That's the kind of man Edward Rutherford is. As long as he sees value in something, he's not the sort of person who would let personal feelings get in the way.”

“... You're rather well-informed.”

“Oh dear, perhaps I said too much.”

A meaningful smile surfaced on her lips as Alice brought her cup back to her lips.

Raishin laughed cynically.

“And then? I'm really touched you've seen fit to share your opinion with me indiscreetly, but are you sure it's ok to reveal so much to me? Just so you know, I am a spy for the Japanese army, you know?”

“I already knew that.”

“... What are you planning?”

“You see, for me, when there’s something I want, I must have it at all costs.”

Alice climbed up onto the table, bringing her face close enough for a kiss.

Her movements were so natural, no alarm bells rang in Raishin’s head.

Thanks to the tension in Shin however, he finally realised his lack of a sense of danger.

A sweet smell filled his lungs, and Raishin reflexively held his breath. He felt like if he had breathed in that air for a few more seconds, he would have fallen completely under her spell.

Staring into his eyes at point-blank range, Alice spoke.

“Become mine, Raishin.”

“... What?”

“I’m saying I want you.”

— Was this about craving the Akabane blood?

Shouko had also wanted his life to use as material for magic arts.

“No. It’s not that.”

As if she had read his mind, Alice laughed while shaking her head.

“I want everything about you. Your strength as a warrior. Your talent for magic arts. Your body for material. You as a man. Finally, your heart as well.”

Raishin drew a sharp breath.

“I refuse.”

“Oh, was I not tempting enough? If you become mine, you might be able to win Magnus—“

“I’m leaving with my friends, and taking Yaya with me.”

Alice burst out laughing. While doing so, she brought out a crystal ball.

“Here, take a look. Your comrades are in this state.”

Seeing the image reflected in the crystal ball, Raishin was stunned.

(2)

“Lustre Saber!”

Riding Sigmund, who was as large as a horse, Charl was flying in the air. While moving at great speeds, she was charging her magic energy, activating the Gram magic circuit.

With the sound of tearing cloth, the blade of light extended.

The blade of light swept in a scything motion towards the two knights. However, the knights turned immediately to face them, crossing their spears.

The light was reflected, grazing Sigmund’s shoulder. It narrowly missed cutting Charl.

Sigmund slowed down, trying to get proper footing as he landed unsteadily.

The Weizsäcker sisters jumped for joy.

“He crashed!”

“He did, he did!”

“It’s it our turn now?”

“It is, it is!”

Receiving their intent, the two knights moved.

Overwhelming acceleration. Hitting their top speed in an instant, they moved in perfect unison as they split left and right, skimming over the water's surface, attacking from both sides.

If she defend against one side, the other side's spear would gore her!

Charl channelled magic energy into Sigmund, forcing him to jump like a cowboy pulling on a horse's reins.

She took to the air. However, it was obvious that that alone wouldn't be able to shake them off.

Changing their vector instantly, the knights chased after her.

Narrowly dodging the thrusts of the spears, a tough dogfight unfolded. After several attempts at evasion, she failed slightly and Sigmund's side was partially sliced, blood flying everywhere.

The spear itself hit the pool wall, causing a spiderweb of cracks to appear from its point of impact.

The thick stone wall had been crushed, and a gaping hole opened up.

The spear was strong enough to crush the wall! While shocked at this revelation, Charl continued to evade. The enemies' constant variation in speed felt like they were just toying with her, but Charl was still hanging in there by the skin of her teeth.

(This is the value... of experience!)

If she hadn't undergone the fight with Shin, she would have been done for with their first attack.

As she dodging a large swing, the two knights separated for an instant. This was her chance!

“Lustre Cannon!”

The blast targeted a solitary knight. The stream of light washed over it—

(— It stopped the blast!?)

The beam of light stopped at the tip of the spear. It didn’t move a single inch!

While absorbing the light, the other knight joined back up with the first.

As they cross their spears, the Lustre Cannon fired forth. From their side, to hers.

Just before the stream of light swallowed Charl, Sigmund dropped altitude to protect her. The light smashed into his wing, completely severing one to the base.

With a roar like a tiger, this time Sigmund crashed for good.

(3)

The claymore’s slash was aimed at Frey’s back.

At that moment, something came crashing into Frey from behind.

The Great Dane had tackled her, pushing her forward.

Tumbling forward, Frey was safe. However—

The claymore easily cut through the armour on its back, slicing into the flesh of the dog.

“Ruby!”

Her face covered with the blood of her beloved dog, Frey was thrown into a state of agitation.

While staggering, the Great Dane somehow managed to get onto its feet. The attack had been rather shallow. Because he wasn’t intending to kill Frey, the slash itself had been shallow.

“That wasn’t your controlled action. Such loyalty, moving to protect its own master.”

Schneider spoke with admiration in his voice. Although his tone had good will in it... but when she crossed eyes with him, Frey was paralysed with fear.

Schneider had defeated Loki in an instant.

His knight was standing with claymore at the ready, waiting for his next command. The claymore that had sliced through Cherubim’s blade so easily. It went without saying that it would be able to easily slice the Garm types in two.

Just now, it had vanished at reappeared behind her back in an instant. That level of speed was on par with Shin. That was probably because they had the same magic circuit installed, right? But it couldn’t be just that— she could sense that his knight had more offensive strength. After all, Shin had never been able to break Cherubim’s blade!

While trembling, Frey mustered up her courage.

“Uu... Everyone!”

At Frey’s command, the Garm types gathered, charging their magic energy.

First, she aimed at Schneider’s knight— and they all howled.

Their howls turned into sonic bullets, tearing up the stone floor as they travelled, rushing towards the knight. Halfway they combined into one, increasing the destructive power as it continued to charge forward.

Rosenberg’s knight came sliding in. Using its tower shield, it blocked the sonic bullet. If it was just a steel shield, it would be easily broken—

But the shield didn’t even have a scratch, like she suspected. After all, this afternoon it had been able to withstand Cherubim’s blade and even warp it. Such defensive strength was superior to Shin’s.

The tower shield blocked off Frey's vision, causing her to lose sight of Schneider's knight.

"How careless."

Rosenberg sighed in pity. In that instant, Schneider's knight appeared directly behind Rabi.

Without giving time for Frey to scream, the claymore came crashing down on Rabi.

Rabi was sent flying, blood spurting everywhere.

He was barely breathing. His tongue hanging out loosely, he was gasping for air.

The sight of blood spreading caused Frey's heart to turn into ice, paralysing her thought process.

Seeing Frey sink into despair in front of him, Schneider opened his mouth.

"Your orders, *Herr*?"

Rosenberg looked around prudently, before delivering his cautious judgement.

"First remove her will to resist. Kill one of them."

"*Jawohl*."

Rabi! No... Stop!"

Emotionlessly, the killing blade descended on the immobile Rabi—

(4)

Frey and Charl's figures were reflected in the crystal ball.

Both were in peril. The knights had driven them into a corner.

(Damn it! What the hell is he doing...!?)

“If you’re wondering about the Sword Emperor, here he is.”

Guessing his thoughts, Alice changed the view.

Loki was collapsed on the forest floor. His back had been sliced, and blood was oozing out.

It felt like ice was running down Raishin’s back. Loki had been defeated...!?

“Here’s another titbit you’ll enjoy. Four people have been despatched to where Karyuusai is. The one leading them is *Vier*— The fourth strongest.”

“— Four?”

“They’ve brought along four *Maschinensoldat* as well. The puppet of snow accompanying you has yet to return. In other words, Karyuusai will be mine. You no longer have any place to go back to.”

“Are you crazy?! How can you use students to conduct a raid!?”

“Don’t worry about them. If it comes to light that people have been slipping past the gate countless times, the academy would suffer an enormous loss of face. So until definite evidence can be provided to prove that people have been coming and going, they will never admit to the students’ movements. It’s precisely because they’re students that they will get away with it scot-free, don’t you think?”

Alice looked like she was enjoying herself as she boasted of her impending victory.

“Your comrades have been defeated, and you have no place to return to. Everything you’ve said has turned into a lie. Now, if you truly understand the situation, you should be a good boy and just be mine.”

”I refuse.”

“... We’re this late in the game, and you still want to be stubborn?

“The Akabane clan might be blood-stained warmongers, but— we don’t serve two masters at the same time.”

“Dear, dear... the samurai code is so hard to deal with.”

Alice returned to her seat, and after thinking for a moment, a devilish smile formed on her face.

“In that case, I’ll try asking your body.”

Instantly, Shin moved into action.

Everything happened in a split second. Raishin’s injured body had no time to react.

His arms were twisted upwards then spread out like a chicken’s wings. A chain came flying out of Shin’s pockets, coiling itself around Raishin’s legs like a snake, binding him. Was that telepathy, Raishin wondered?

“... What are you doing?”

“Something nice. <3”

She spoke too quickly, cheerfully disappearing beneath the round table.

Shin’s arms had an unnatural strength in them. It seemed like he was... angry?

Just as Raishin wondered what was going on, a weird sensation assaulted his nether regions.

“Wha—!?”



Of all

things, Alice's head popped up between his knees.

Her sliver hair spilled onto his thighs, transmitting a tantalising sensation through the fabric of his pants. The sweet smell was probably her perfume. As she groped his inner thighs, he shuddered as a pleasant feeling began to fill his waist. Ever so slowly, her fingertips crept suggestively towards a dangerous place—

“H-hey! Stop that! What are you doing!?”

Alice tilted her head slightly, a bewitching look in her eyes.

“What, you say... isn't this the language of lovers?”

“Don't talk using your body! First use your words!”

“You're extremely stubborn, so I thought I'd put in all my effort into making you mine.”

“Are you Yaya!? Stop that, you shameless woman!”

With a clink, Alice removed Raishin's belt. Raishin grew flustered.

This was bad. If things continued at this rate, it would become bad in more ways than one.

“S-stop... Y-you...!”

At that moment, there was a cracking sound like the air itself had been split.

Following immediately after, there was a mysterious rumbling in the ground.

A ghastly atmosphere wafted over, making Raishin feel like the temperature in the room had dropped at least three degrees.

“Alice... What are you doing to Raishin...?”

A chilly voice could be heard. Standing in the entrance of the hall was the source of the tremors.

Yaya's expression was akin to a vengeful ghost's, so scary that it would have driven evil spirits away.

Alice sighed. The sensation of her breath on his skin made Raishin's waist twitch uncontrollably.

"Such a naughty child, Yaya. Didn't you promise to wait inside the room?"

"But...! I felt like someone was about to do naughty things with Raishin...!"

"... Dear, dear. Just what kind of sensors are installed in the Setsugetsuka?"

Alice smiled wryly, giving Raishin a look of sympathy.

"Yaya!"

Raishin struggled against his restraints, but of course Shin remained unperturbed by this.

Applying more strength recklessly, Raishin's shoulders began to creak ominously.

"Now hang on, Raishin. Don't be rash. Let's do this a little more calmly, shan't we?"

"Let me speak to Yaya!"

"Can I ask what you intend to discuss?"

"... Whether or not I become yours, is something I can only decide after I talk to Yaya."

Raishin's words reeked of desperation. However, Alice eyes sparkled like she had heard something amusing.

"Let me warn you in advance— If you both arrive at the wrong conclusion, it will end up causing war, you know?"

“I could say the same to you. Do you intend to start a war? You’ve even gone as far as assault Shouko.”

“I wouldn’t particularly care if things came to that.”

“—!”

“However, we do not intend to start a war. As long the Japanese army agree to bury the hatchet and let bygones be bygones, there won’t be any problem. We’ve already prepared adequate compensation, and I’m sure those shysters in the political arena can handle the negotiations.”

A beautiful smile surfaced on her face, and she placed a fingertip on Raishin’s chest.

“So, everything is up to you. Will you continue to struggle to the bitter end, or...?”

So basically, she was telling him that not only was he physically struggling in vain, the intentions behind them was also for naught.

Raishin was at a point beyond anger, until he felt like laughing.

Trying a lousy lie on this woman would be useless. So he decided to speak his mind instead.

“I don’t have the guts to pull the trigger that will start a world war.”

“I thought as much.”

“... Let me speak to Yaya.”

“Fine. Cut him loose, Shin.”

“My lady, you must not give this man his freedom!”

“But I said it was fine, didn’t I?”

There was rumbling as flames of magic energy began to shoot from Alice's shoulder and eyes.

Raishin felt the same overwhelming power as he had when in the presence of Loki, Magnus and the headmaster.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. This girl... She wasn't an ordinary person!

"Things over at Karyuusai's end should be wrapped up about now, and his allies have already been wiped out. Even if he does get the doll of the moon back, there is nothing he can do anymore."

For some reason, Raishin detected a hint of disappointment in her voice when she said that.

"And even if he chooses to fight, we just have to beat him back down. Or are you saying you will lose to a single doll, even when I'm by your side, Shin?"

"No... I..."

"Listen, Shin. There are two types of people in the world. There are those who wage wars to satiate their greed, and those who are just spineless worms."

Shin ground his teeth, before he eventually released Raishin with great reluctance.

His channelled his anger into severing the chains binding Raishin with a swift kick. The force generated almost caused his ankles to snap, but Raishin didn't voice his displeasure, stumbling away from the chair.

Leaving Shin and Alice, this time he walked over to the real Yaya.

He was still out of focus to her. Raishin charged his magic energy, dispelling Komurasaki's Yaegasumi.

Finally, Yaya's eyes could lock on to Raishin— and at that moment.

“Raishin is an idiot!”

She shouted at him. Raishin was taken aback.

“No wait, calm down ok? That thing earlier was that shameless woman’s selfish actions ok? It wasn’t up to me at all—“

“Why did you come here...?”

Sniffing audibly, large tears began to fall off her face.

“You came all this way... By yourself! And you’re hurt again!”

She didn’t have any words left. Wailing, Yaya began to cry loudly.

“... I’m sorry.”

Raishin pulled Yaya to him, hugging her shaking shoulders.

“But, I couldn’t give up on you— no matter what.”

“...!”

“Why did you just disappear without saying a word like that?”

“That’s because...!”

Yaya buried her face into Raishin’s chest, and unable to hold back her feelings the words tumbled out.

“Big sis Irori would be far more useful than Yaya...”

“That’s not true. You’re my important partner.”

“But the reason Raishin’s wounds aren’t healing is Yaya’s fault, isn’t it?”

“Huh...?”

“By being close to Raishin, Yaya is sucking Raishin’s life away, isn’t she?”

Raishin felt like a bucket of cold water had been thrown against his forehead.

Yaya had just said something incredible. It was probably an idea Alice had sneaked into her mind, but at the very least, things were beginning to make sense.

It was definitely true. His wounds had been healing slowly ever since he had arrived here.

“Once we arrived in the academy, Shouko did something to Yaya, and that’s what’s causing this, isn’t it...?!”

Yaya choked back a sob. It was like she was blaming and cursing herself for causing everything.

That’s right— During that incident with Cannibal Candy, Shouko had done something to Yaya.

Yaya’s eyes had spun in circles and she collapsed. After that, Yaya’s body had begun undergoing a strange change.

Something had appeared which Raishin had never seen before in the two years he had spent with Yaya—The horn on her forehead.

When Yaya broke free from the security guards’ restraints, that same horn had appeared again.

It seemed that the Setsugetsuka sisters still had many secrets hidden inside them that Raishin knew nothing about.

“... You’re stealing my life?”

Raishin sighed, then he gently pushed Yaya away from his chest.

“You’re wrong!”

Yaya’s eyes widened as she stared up at Raishin.

“How many times have you saved my life already?”

“__”

“The person that has always protected me is you, Yaya.”

It was time to make his strongest appeal. Raishin silently prayed his words would be able to reach her.

“I have only one partner, and that’s you. That’s why I’m asking you not to abandon me now.”

In that instant, Yaya’s expression crumbled.

Her face crumpled up and tears started to flow again.

Eventually, Yaya started to laugh through her tears, smiling at him.

“Don’t abandon me... Raishin... That’s so uncool.”

“I know.”

Yaya placed Raishin’s hands in hers with slight reservation.

There was a sudden sound of clapping that sounded forced. It was Alice.

“As expected of a playboy. Just like the rumours say, you’re an expert on manipulating a woman’s heart.”

“Raishin... Those rumours...!”

“Ow! Calm down Yaya! You’re crushing my hands!”

He hurriedly let go. The touching scene had been ruined.

“Now that you’ve kissed and made up, I hope you both continue to get along since I’ll have the both of you lend me your strength.”

Raishin laughed cynically.

“I’ve gotten Yaya back and you still think I’m going to do as you say?”

“Well, obviously I’m going to have to put a collar on you. Since you’re not as docile as Charlotte, I’m going to have to prepare a special collar for you. One that will go ‘BOOM!’ if you don’t listen to commands.”

“I’m going to have to say no to that. It’s about time we left.”

“... Did I mishear you?”

The atmosphere began to crackle.

The magic energy Alice was releasing was enough to shake the very air about her. Shin’s killing intent wafted over as he slowly moved in front of his mistress. He began to release a violently strong magic energy as well.

The pair’s magic energy were overwhelming. Raishin’s ribs and shoulders began to throb in pain.

Shin already possessed formidable ability by himself. Now that a puppeteer like Alice was around, his battle ability was incalculable. Just thinking about it gave Raishin the shivers.

However, he didn’t flinch.

“You lot might be caught up in this defecting to Germany business, but I’ll have to decline.”

“... How amazingly foolish. Do you really think you can get away with such selfishness?”

“You bet. Yaya and I are going back. Even if it means having to go through you.”

“Do you intend to start a war?”

“No.”

“Your allies will be annihilated, you know?”

“They won’t.”

“Do you plan on letting Karyuusai die?”

“Obviously not.”

“Then you’re a kid! Just a delusional child!”

“Not only that. I’ve been told my brain is made out of noble gas too.”

Raishin grabbed onto Yaya’s hand, and with his other free hand he pointed at Alice’s chest.

“Look into your crystal ball. Everything you just said has now become a lie.”

A faint smile crept onto Alice’s lips as she wordlessly brought out her crystal and channelled magic energy to it.

A second later, what the crystal reflected was enough to make even the colour of Alice’s face change.

(5)

The thing that came crashing into Shouko’s room was a knight like automaton.

There were black crosses on the decorative cloth it was wearing. Clad in armour, it was wielding a hammer.

Brandishing the weapon about, the knight swung the hammer down onto the crown of Shouko’s head.

“Mistress!”

The girl clad in the autumn coloured kimono cried out anxiously.

Shouko didn’t even bother to dodge the incoming blow.

There was a sharp sound. The hammer looked like it had collided with Shouko’s head— but it was actually a few millimetres away. Something had stopped it.

The thing protecting Shouko was a hexagonally shaped red light. It was a barrier created by magic arts.

The barrier blocked, deflected, then repelled the knight's hammer.

“Mistress! Are you alright!?”

The girl in the kimono came flying over to Shouko's side.

Shouko nodded at the girl, then turned to Kimberly with a laugh.

“I thought you were only going to watch?”

“Shouldn't you be expressing your gratitude?”

Kimberly smiled wryly as the barrier vanished.

“All I can do here is to just watch— but obviously, I have to defend myself too.”

Another knight came flying in from outside. Kimberly was completely unmoved.

“Show yourself, *Zermalmer* Schmidt.”

Eventually, a figure that had been standing on one of the cherry blossoms outside the window, hiding behind the knight, revealed itself.

“I'm impressed you knew it was me, Professor Kimberly.”

It was a tanned youth. Even though he wasn't wearing a uniform, he cut a student looking figure.

“It was child's play. Your magic energy might be impressive in terms of sheer output, but your emissions have the habit of being chaotic. There's a lot of noise mixed into it. I thought I told you to correct that deficiency.”

“My apologies. But regardless of whether I display that habit or not, I am a peerless puppeteer without equal.”

“I’m in the middle of a discussion with Karyuusai here. Don’t you have a Night Party to be attending? Go back.”

“I’m afraid I cannot do that.”

“You can’t?”

Showing off a gleeful grin, the youth spoke in an arrogant tone of voice.

“Now that you’ve seen my face, I’m afraid I’ll have to eliminate you as well.”

“Are you sure you’re up to it? You’re such a poor student after all.”

The youth didn’t reply, but laughed heartily instead. It looked like he had an abundance of self-confidence.

Kimberly shook her head.

“An idiot can brag about his sword as much as he likes. Just because you have a sharp knife, you shouldn’t confuse that with becoming strong. I don’t like giving out punishments, but it seems you’re in serious need of discipline. Taking an automata out of school grounds, speaking to a teaching staff with the highest level of disrespect, and furthermore, you’re now insinuating you’re going to kill.”

“If you don’t want to be killed, surrender quietly. The guards here will soon be taken care of before long. At any rate, I am *Vier* of the *Kreuzritter* — with my *Maschinensoldat* at my side. Someone like you without any automaton by your side has no hope of winning.”

“Oh? In that case Professor,”

Up till now, Shouko had remained silent, but now she interjected with a slight smile.

“I will lend you my child here.”

Shouko threw a look at the girl next to her. The girl nodded, stepping in front of Kimberly.

Kimberly grinned, sending a large amount of magic energy into the girl's back.

“My condolences Schmidt. With this, you have no hope of winning.”

Even though her magic circuit had yet to activate, a biting cold air was emanating from the girl's body.

It was a force so powerful it seemed to force the breath out of everything. Schmidt's knight was pushed back against the wall, Schmidt himself fell off the branch he was standing on.

His knight hurriedly jumped out to catch him, holding him as they both landed.

“Everyone! To me!”

Schmidt yelled out. There was a tinge of impatience in his voice. Perhaps he had sensed his opponent's ability, and his self-confidence was shaken. He didn't have the guts to face this alone.

Kimberly placed her hand on the girl's back, finding the weak flow of magic energy that signalled the circuit.

“Oh...? This is beautiful... Such a splendid circuit. I don't think I can fully grasp its workings anytime soon. Can I leave the control to you?”

“Of course, Miss Kimberly.”

In the time this exchange had happened, Schmidt's comrades had gathered.

There was a student who looked like an elderly priest. There were two other students who looked familiar. They all had their knights with them. In total there were eight figures standing below.

“Well then, it's time to teach these guys a lesson in manners—“

Kimberly chuckled faintly, her intonation disappearing with every word.

“Irori, do it.”

A torrent of magic energy gushed forth from the girl's body, as Kimberly revealed the deception.

Irori's icy silver hair sparkled as a violently cold wind blasted forth from her body.

The one-sided massacre was about to begin.

Chapter 7 – Rosen Kavalier, der den Heiligen Ort Erreicht

(1)

The blade swung down at Rabi sliced through clean air, cutting the ground.

Before Frey's astounded face, a metallic wing had been thrust in front of her, rotating in place.

— No, even for a wing, its design was too angular. It was the back parts of Cherubim's frame, specifically the large sword's hilt and the containers that held the short swords.

Holding onto Rabi, Cherubim was hovering close to the ground. With one wing split, it slipped past the naked blade, thus rescuing Rabi.

Frey hurriedly searched for Loki's figure. He was standing on the top row of the seats which was a little ways from the amphitheatre, breathing raggedly.

His forehead, arms and chest were all split open, blood dripping from the wounds. However, his heart wasn't going out of control. With a calm look in his eyes, he stared down at Rosenberg and Schneider from his vantage point.

“If I may say so, I am a tolerant person. However, there are three things in this world I cannot forgive.”

With every word, Loki took a further step down the stairs.

“You. All of you. And the person who fell behind scum like you, me.”

Next to Rosenberg, Schneider let out a sigh.

“It looks like you haven’t learnt your lesson. You’re not as smart as I thought, Sword Emperor.”

“Unfortunately, I am a hard-headed idiot with metal for brains.”

Loki moved to stand in front of Frey, to protect her, but then he softly whispered under his breath.

“Frey. Erase all sound.”

Hearing her name so abruptly made her flustered, but Frey still understood Loki’s intent.

Blowing her whistle, she issued orders to the Garm types. Rising unsteadily to their feet, the Garm types gallantly spread out in a circle surrounding the amphitheatre.

(Do your best... Rabi... Everyone!)

Receiving Frey’s magic energy, their distant howls began to get louder.

Their howls began to harmonise uncannily— suddenly, the effect kicked in.

All sound vanished. Completely. The whole area had suddenly become a dead zone for noise.

Bewildered, Schneider tried to yell something, but of course, there was no sound. Rosenberg was also displaying a rare show of emotion, being visibly affected by the sudden change.

However, there was no chance for them to react. Loki had already begun his attack.

Cherubim brandished its broken blade, charging at Schneider’s knight. Rosenberg’s knight threw its tiny body into the gap, bracing its tower shield for impact.

There was no way Cherubim was going to breach that. Even so, Loki smashed Cherubim's blade against the shield.

There was a silent clash of steel against steel. Just as it look like they were engaged in a test of strength—

“—“

It was probably a howl of pain. But no one could hear it.

From Frey's position, she could see what had happened. Cherubim's short swords had sliced through Rosenberg's leg armour.

Frey remembered her stepfather's words.

(In actual battle, attacking the puppeteer is standard practise.)

This wasn't the Night Party. No one could fault Loki for going after the puppeteer.

Now that Frey had erased all sound, Cherubim's short swords were like silent assassins dancing about the battlefield.

Because the shield bearing knight was locked in combat with Cherubim, it couldn't return to its master.

“—!”

Bastard, was what his lips formed as Schneider gave his knight the attack order.

However, his reactions were dulled. It was due to the lack of sound. As someone used to handling an automaton with a high intelligence, most of the commands were given verbally, and this caused a slight discomfort.

On the other hand, Loki had always commanded his automaton through magic energy alone, so it was normal service for him.

He had no dull movements whatsoever!

The claymore came at him. At the same time he dodged it by a whisker, Loki changed Cherubim into its large sword form. The tip had been repaired so it was slightly bent, making it look awkward, but it was still functional. Swinging it with great vigour, it slipped through the knight's head like a hot knife through butter—

Enveloped in scorching hot fire, the knight was sliced from behind.

The heat and the blade traced a line down the knight's spinal cord. A large volume of blood spurted out, dying Cherubim a dark red. The knight crumpled down, falling to a single strike.

Its flesh crumbled apart, turning into darkened ash.

“—!?”

Schneider's lips formed the words 'Impossible!' A bloody Rosenberg also looked incredulous. Frey had the same thoughts as them. Cherubim's blade cut through that enemy!

Loki turned in her direction and waved at her.

Frey nodded, dispelling the Garm types' harmony.

The silence was shattered, sound returning to the area. The sound of the wind blowing, the leaves rustling, and—

“... Thanks to you, I've narrowly escaped death again.”

Loki's blunt voice.

A visibly overjoyed Frey jumped at Loki's back like a little puppy.

(2)

Having lost a wing, Sigmund lost balance.

With a crash, he fell into the water. Charl was dragged down along with him. Charl desperately fought against the water, clinging tightly onto Sigmund.

“Sigmund! Are you ok!?”

The surface of the water turned a faint red. He had lost a lot of blood. However Sigmund had a normal look on his face, and his voice feigned ignorance of what had just happened to him.

“As expected of the Gram circuit. You really only comprehend its power after experiencing it with your own body.”

“Is this the time to be saying that? You could die!”

“My heart is fine. But more importantly, Charl.”

“... I know. We can't go on like this.”

Charl turned around in irritation.

The twins were bouncing about happily, giving each other high fives.

It seemed they thought they had already won. If she was going to strike, now would be as good a time as any.

“Let's... do that.”

She murmured her intent. Sigmund turned his neck enquiringly towards her.

“Are you able?”

“It's child's play for me. But— will you be ok?”

“Compared to last time when we fought Shin, I still have magic energy in reserve to spare. However, this next move will exhaust my energy to its limits. So you have to exhaust yours as well, in order to supply me.”

“I got it.”

Charl climbed onto his back, and Sigmund beat his three wings against the water's surface, rising into the air.

“What are you doing?”

“Hey, hey, what are you doing?”

“Annoying brats! You’re going to be sorry!”

Charl clenched her fists, mustering all her magic energy.

“Let’s do this, Sigmund— Lustre Flare!”

She transmitted a tremendous amount of magic energy. Sigmund’s jaw opened, and many needles of light scattered forth.

The twins’ knights crossed their spears, preparing to reflect the attack... however, Sigmund’s jaw wasn’t aimed at them, but at the water below them.

The needles of light fell like a heavy rain. They blew the water apart, annihilating it, causing bright light to shine everywhere. With wave after wave of light fusing, it caused everyone’s vision to turn pure white.

“What’s happening!?”

“It’s too bright! I can’t see!”

The twins panicked. The knights were also at a loss, remaining where they were with their spears crossed.

While this was going on, a large volume of light enveloped Sigmund as he began to transform.

A ghostly air began to ooze from every part of his body. A thick darkness surrounded him, like he had been swallowed by a dark cloud.

“Wake, o power... Fafnir... Tyrant Rex!”

Charl channelled all the magic energy she could give. From within the light-swallowing darkness, burly arms and legs emerged. Quite frankly, they were huge. One arm was the size of an elephant.

Sigmund's growth didn't stop. He kept increasing in mass, until he was large enough to fit into the whole pool. The pool, which had been enveloped in light, was suddenly reversed into being dominated by Sigmund and the darkness.

The twins were in full-fledged panic mode, screaming in confusion.

The knights assumed a defensive mode to protect their mistresses. One of the knights was assaulted by one of the enormous dragon's claws. With fearsome strength, it held the knight in a vice-like grip.

The knight's struggles were in vain as Sigmund slammed him against the wall with explosive strength.

At the same time, the other knight was just about to take aim at his massive jaw—

“Lustre Cannon!”

From almost point blank distance, a large volume of magic energy was converted into an attack.

The knight held out its spear, adopting a defensive posture. One of the twins hurriedly channelled magic energy. With its puppeteer's magic energy added to its own, the sum of their magic energy was nothing to sniff at. The Lustre Cannon was perfectly blocked.

(I see... If it's only one of them, the most they can do is to block it.)

Charl nodded. If she had to guess, this was an improvement on Shin's magic art. This was probably a magic circuit that allowed control of a target's vector. Compared to Shin, this circuit allowed control of external objects rather than being limited to self-control. When the puppeteer's magic energy was taken into account as well, this was quite the big deal. However—

When faced with a Lustre Cannon at full power, this circuit wasn't something that could defend against it!

“Quickly, run away! If you don’t, you’ll die!”

She raised her voice. Hearing the words ‘you’ll die’, the twins froze in fear.

There was quite the kerfuffle as the twins fled in a panic. Just before the knight was overwhelmed by the blast, Charl concentrated, shifting the trajectory of the shot. The knight’s spear, left arm and left leg were annihilated as the Lustre Cannon blew a large hole in the wall.

The knight had ceased functioning. Just as Charl let out a sigh of relief, Sigmund roared.

Looking down, there was a spear thrust into his right arm. The knight he had been clutching onto had attacked with its spear. The spear sliced easily through flesh, gouging bone.

Such fearsome destructive power. Even though it was revolting it was part of Shin’s line after all.

The twins had put their all into powering the remaining knight with magic energy. Charl could feel 3 people’s worth coming from it.

While Charl was still stunned, Sigmund discarded his right arm without a single hint of hesitation.

The large arm separated, falling into the pool and causing a large volume of water to splash up.

“““We did it!”””

The twins celebrated. However, the T-Rex wasn’t so weak that it would be defeated after merely losing an arm.

Sigmund’s jaws were already locked onto the remaining knight.

“Lustre Saber!”

A focused thin blade of light shot out. The knight rapidly ascended into the air, performing zig-zags as it attempted to dodge. The Lustre Saber wasn't something that could be dodged with those levels of speed though.

The light sliced and diced the ceiling as it chased after the knight. Eventually, the blade of light caught up, slashing both the knight's legs. Fresh blood spurted out. Charl reflexively covered her mouth at the sight.

Both knights were still breathing. If they were normal automata they would still be able to continue fighting.

However— the two bodies weren't moving. The shock and trauma must have caused them to pass out.

“How wretched. This is so ironic. The *Maschinensoldat* are truly a formidable foe, but—“

Because they were human, they weren't immune to pain or wounds.

The twins had lost their will to fight; they were hugging each other while trembling all over.

The fight was over. Charl let out a deep breath as all the tension she had built up finally eased away.

(3)

Before Yaya's eyes, the crystal ball Alice was holding on to dropped out of her hands.

As it rolled on the floor, the images reflected within showed the Kreuzritter getting defeated one after another.

Raishin stared at Alice and Shin, speaking candidly.

“They won't lose to people like you, who rely on strength in numbers while being small-minded.”

“... That’s really funny, coming from you. Just how are we so different from you?”

“Why did you team up?”

“Isn’t it obvious? There was merit in doing so.”

“That’s it. The fact that we’re teaming up now is going to be disadvantageous in the end. In fact it would have been much better if either of us were to disappear. Even so,”

Taking a deep breath, Raishin continued in a quiet voice.

“They couldn’t bear to abandon me or Yaya and lent me their strength. They’re no way those guys would ever lose to a bunch of people who are only allies of convenience.”

Hearing those words, a surge of warm emotion flowed through Yaya’s chest.

He was right. Everyone was fighting for their sakes.

Even though I fell for Alice’s words and selfishly ran off, everyone was still doing so much for me...

The inside of her nose hurt. But there was time to cry later.

She checked the flow of magic energy within her. As always, it was ready to accept Raishin’s magic energy at any time.

“Such capriciousness. Do you really intent to start a war?”

Alice posed a question to Raishin. He shook his head.

“No. There won’t be a war. You’ve made a critical blunder.”

“... Oh?”

“Your comrades picked a fight with Professor Kimberly— Nectar. A poor choice of opponent. Now that it has come to this though, any propaganda you create will be weakened significantly. Russia, England and France will move to surround Germany. In this situation, will Germany still start a meaningless war? Even with the Machine Dolls that you boast about, Germany will end up being completely defeated, you know?”

“... I see, so that’s why I kept seeing the doll of snow in my crystal. You had a deception magic art activated, that’s why you couldn’t use Yaegasumi.”

“That’s right.”

“So, you came all this way here unarmed?”

“I wasn’t unarmed. Komurasaki was with me.”

“That’s being unarmed, isn’t it?! The doll of flower has no battle capabilities whatsoever!”

Her voiced was raised. It wasn’t in anger though, Raishin thought he noted a tinge of joy in it.

Pressing her hand to her forehead, Alice started to laugh while looking upwards.

“My goodness, this is really unbelievable. You sent your king deep into enemy territory all by itself, an amazingly bad move.”

“I thought so too at first, but it isn’t. In Shogi, there’s something called Entering King.”

“Entering King?”

“Once your king is inside the enemy’s territory, it’s very hard to capture.”

Having been taught the basics by Raishin, Yaya knew what Shogi was.

Unlike chess, in shogi you could drop captured pieces anywhere on the board.

Pieces dropped in enemy territory could be promoted immediately on the next turn.

Because of that, a king in enemy territory had a solid defence. With many strong allies able to be dropped next to the king one after another, they could surround and fortify the king's position.

So right now, if Raishin was the king, then Yaya was dropped next to him.

And Yaya — she was the promoted rook and knight rolled into one piece worth a thousand.

The smile vanished off Alice face as she stared at Raishin with a serious look.

“Interesting. Take him out, Shin. You can at least do that much, can't you?”

“With my lady's support, it will be a piece of cake.”

Shin moved. Like always, he wasn't affected by inertia as he accelerated to maximum speed— or so Raishin thought, but this time he was even faster than normal.

Glancing over, he saw Alice's hand outstretched, channelling magic energy over. Her power was like wind to his sails, causing Shin's increase in speed. In a smooth sliding motion, he went around Yaya, then suddenly changed his vector at a certain point, closing in for an attack.

Yaya used her own body as a shield, protecting Raishin. Shin came to a sudden halt, before suddenly accelerating again, flying up above Yaya's head. Yaya immediately lost sight of Shin after his tricky movement.

But Raishin had grasped his movements. Transmitting a pulse of magic energy to Yaya, he told her Shin's position. Accepting the flow of magic energy, Yaya adjusted her line of sight and blocked the kick coming down from above.

“Suimei Nijuuyonshou!”

“Roger!”

Chasing after Shin who was landing, Yaya unleashed a kick. Shin looked surprised, but he lightly dodged backwards— or he feigned doing so, as he charged forward instead.

His heavy kick caught Yaya in mid-air. She crossed her arms to block it. Being in mid-air, she had no way of countering the force generated, tumbling on the floor after sailing through the air.

As expected, Shin was a true veteran who had experienced countless fights. However, Yaya couldn't afford to lose either. After rolling once she quickly got back up on her feet, returning to Raishin's side.

Looking at Yaya's behaviour, Alice was deeply fascinated.

“Splendid. When scholars part ways for three days, they will view each other in a different light when they meet again later— I believe that's an oriental saying.”

“I had to pay a high price for the lessons learnt though.”

He clutched his ribs. The cost of the battle experience he had accumulated was the injury to his ribs.

Yaya understood. Raishin could read Shin's intentions. His speed and movement may have been dangerous, but as long as Raishin could read Shin, he could react accordingly.

“If you keep playing around you'll end up with egg on your face. Hurry up and finish them, Shin.”

In place of an answer, Shin moved again. This time he didn't receive Alice's commands or magic energy; he acted out of his own accord. This was what made Shin so dangerous. He could act on his own judgement and with his magic energy alone, and even then he already displayed fearsome battle capability.

Shin slipped around to Raishin's flank, charging in from the side.

Yaya flew to block him off, but at that moment.

Shin's figure suddenly vanished.

An instant later, the shadow of a figure moving at high speed was reflected on the opposite wall.

Yaya stared in amazement. That was unbelievable speed. It was supersonic!

Just as Yaya locked onto the shadow, she suddenly felt a violent killing intent from behind her.

Shin reappeared abruptly. He unleashed a fierce kick from behind Raishin.

Raishin threw himself down on the ground, dodging the kicks. His instincts had alerted him to the danger. Shin continued to pursue Raishin even further. A heavy kick was about to crash into Raishin, but Yaya barely made it in time. As she blocked the kick, the impact caused her legs to buckle.

His kick was remarkably heavy! The floor itself caved in under the force!

Yaya's body creaked, and her white skin split apart. Raishin wasn't able to channel magic energy in time, so Yaya had borne the burden of the blow without any magic energy to reinforce her.

"Yaya!"

"Yaya is fine!"

Gathering her strength, she repelled Shin. Shin flew through the air—

And disappeared again.

Once more, the shadow of Shin's figure moving at rapid speed appeared behind Raishin.

(Again!? What's this feeling...!?)

Something felt off about this situation. Was it because he was unable to predict Shin's acceleration? Even then...

Yaya was also unable to discern Shin's real position. While feeling bewildered, Raishin reached into his harness, throwing a stun grenade— at Alice.

It wasn't a direct hit. Shin appeared all of a sudden, catching the grenade.

The next instant, there was an explosion. The sound and the flash, as well as the shockwave rocked the hall.

Alice staggered backwards... but that was it. Shin had protected her, and she was fine.

A pity. If she had fainted, Shin's battle capability would have been halved.

“What's wrong, Raishin...?”

Yaya's voice was determined.

They had prepared a strategy in order to defeat Shin, and right now Yaya seemed to be asking whether it was time to enact the plan.

After losing to Shin, Charl wasn't the only one spurred into taking action. Raishin and Yaya had both ran numerous simulations, coming up with counter-plans for Shin.

“No... Under these circumstances, we can't use it.”

If their opponent was just Shin alone, there was a way to seal his movements.

However, not only was that an extremely difficult plan— more importantly, Alice was present now.

Even if they sealed Shin's movement, Alice could still control his magic circuits. If these two weren't split up, Raishin wouldn't be able to use his trump card.

“— No, it's the opposite!”

Raishin began to focus his magic energy. He had realised something.

Even though they were in the middle of battle, Yaya felt overjoyed. No matter what dangers he was faced with, Raishin was always constantly formulating plans, using his wits in ways that surprised even Yaya, in order to escape all the traps before them.

“Yaya. Can you give me control for a little while?”

“Yes!”

“Oh my, what have you come up with this time?”

A sharp-eyed Alice smiled at them.

“Still, I have to complain about that stunt you pulled earlier. Thanks to that my hair smells of smoke and gunpowder. Won’t you wash it for me later, Raishin?”

“Idiot. Wash your own hair.”

“I see. Does that mean you’re ok with us entering the bath together?”

“Raishin...!”

While the banter was going on, Alice had conjured up magic energy.

There was a roar as she sent it straight into Shin.

It was ridiculous. Her output was on a different level altogether!

It looked like she wanted to deal a decisive blow. The magic energy flowed through Shin completely, activating his magic circuit.

Shin vanished again.

A split second later, Shin’s figure appeared at Raishin’s right hand.

Not good! Raishin’s in danger!

However, Raishin didn’t react. All Yaya could do now was to believe in Raishin and cede control to him. Believe, rely and entrust herself to him...

“Tenken Kyuujuurokushou.”

Raishin’s magic energy carried his intent with it.

With all her strength behind it, Yaya punched, but she didn’t punch to his side. She slammed her fist forward.

It was a blow powerful enough to warp the atmosphere.

The swinging of her fist itself caused the floor to break apart. Yaya’s fist hit nothing but air, but even then the shockwave cause the floor to crumble and generate a sonic boom.

Immediately after that, there was the sound of someone collapsing on the ground.

The Shin at his right hand— was an illusion— vanished, and the real Shin appeared lying on the ground.

Alice gasped. This was a development she hadn’t foreseen.

Shin tried to get up, but he couldn’t. Every time he stood up, he immediately tumbled back down on the floor.

His sense of balance was gone.

Yaya’s fist hadn’t hit him. However, the shockwave generated had ruptured his eardrums.

Shin didn’t give up. He tried to activate his own magic circuits—

“Guh... Gaaaaaaah!”

He screamed. The skin on his arms started to fall apart, scattering about the place.

“Stop it, Shin. Do you want to end up in pieces?”

Alice still had a look of disbelief on her face, and she stared fixedly at Raishin.

“I’m shocked. I didn’t think you’d see through my Brocken so quickly.”

Raishin pointed at Shin, who was still unable to stand.

“Ever since earlier, his movements— they were impossibly fast.”

“But my registration code is **Elf Speeder**, you know?”

“Once you hit supersonic speeds, there will be a sonic boom. Just like what Yaya did just now.”

So in other words, that wasn't actually real speed.

“You kept showing me needless things.”

It was the power to control illusions. The power of transformation. What looked like disappearance was simply an illusion of invisibility.

What happened if all those effects were the product of a singular magic art?

“If you had the power to manipulate illusions, then everything made sense. But then I realised something strange. If you could make Shin invisible, why not just let Shin attack while remaining invisible?”

Alice felt silent. Raishin smiled.

“You couldn't. Because of the Magic Activity Dissonance Theory.”

“... is what you guessed, is that what you're trying to say?”

Alice smiled wryly. Yaya finally understood the rationale behind Raishin's actions.

When Shin attacked, Alice magic art lost its effects. Conversely, when Alice's magic art was concealing Shin, he wasn't able to use his own magic art.

The two types of magic arts weren't able to co-exist within Shin's body.

When invisible under Alice's magic art, Shin's speed was that of a normal human—

Attacks would be able to damage him. And of course, his eardrums would rupture under sufficient pressure.

With his sense of balance thrown into confusion, right now Shin was unable to control his own body!

They'd won— or just as Yaya thought that.

“I thank you for your explanation, but if you think you've won with that, you're still one step behind.”

Alice laughed. All the magic energy she released was now focused into Shin's body.

Shin shot up on his feet and charged towards Yaya. However, rather than a kick, he was flying straight at her with a headbutt. Alice was still full of magic energy. Alice's reserve and Shin's strength meant that with Alice in control, the two of them could still fight...

Yaya nimbly dodged Shin's advance, kicking him down to the ground from above.

Shin was unable to react, let alone defend. Unable to control his body, he crashed into the ground.

This was it! But then, even Yaya was surprised by what happened next.

Shin flipped up, flying towards Yaya who was directly above him.

Yaya dodged in mid-air, warding off the attack before counterattacking with a kick.

It was a direct hit. Shin was blown away easily, tumbling on the ground.

Letting out a small sigh, Raishin finally spoke up, unable to bear the pathetic sight any longer.

“Just stop already, Alice. You’re way smarter than me, **Second Last**, but I’ll give you a lecture now. What’s the benefit of Machinart?”

“... The existence of automata.”

“Exactly. Automata are important. Yaya, Irori and Komurasaki are all smarter than I am. They’re able to use their intricate magic circuits with a fine degree of control. I might give the general instructions, but they’re the ones who do the heavy lifting. The finer aspects are all them.”

Shin looked down at the unmoving Shin, taking pity on him.

“I don’t understand Shin’s magic circuit. Charl said it was controlling vectors down to the molecular level, but to be honest, it flew over my head. Even so—“

Alice was silent. It seemed she had already realised what Raishin wanted to say.

“How many molecules are there? Is it a number we can realistically control?”

Because it was Shin’s own body, he could control it by feeling alone.

He was able to control it without any lag in time from command to execution, and feedback from his senses were instantaneous.

Because of that, he could react to both attack and defence. He could even react to feints.

But Alice was a different story. Even if she was a talented mage, controlling a different body down to the molecular level was exceeding difficult. Furthermore, there was a gap in close combat ability between them.

“We are two in one. You are alone by yourself. There’s no way for you to win.”

“If that’s the case, prove it to me!”

Alice started generating all the magic energy left in her. This was literally all she had left in the tank. The walls began to shake and rubble began to fall from the

ceiling. The massive volume of magic energy caused the entire hall to tremble, and an earthquake began to shake the floor.

Shin slowly rose up— and then he moved.

He began to circle around the room. Such speed! The shockwaves he generated tore up the floor.

Raishin understood. This was a valid tactic as well. To make up for the gap in close combat experience between them, Alice wasn't fighting them using cheap tricks, it was a pure contest of speed and strength. She was intending to smash them with an unstoppable force.

However, this was what Raishin was aiming for.

“Shinkan Zesshou—“

Shinkan was used when intercepting an enemy's attack. Yaya confirmed his intent, adopting a defensive posture, dodging Shin's charge slightly.

The moment they crossed each other, Yaya grabbed Shin by the arm, twisting his wrist.

It was an aikido technique. Faced with the intricate movements of jujutsu, Alice was unable to counter.

Shin was easily flipped over, crashing into the floor— and at that moment.

“Shinki Mikazuchi.”

Adding on to the heavy blow, Yaya followed up with an additional attack. Like she was trying to smash a brick, Yaya drove her fist downwards at Shin, who was at her feet.

Alice activated Shin's magic circuit, using an upward vector to resist.

There was a fierce clash of power. The shockwave generated ripped the floor apart, sending pebbles flying everywhere.

However Raishin's magic energy didn't waver. It grew stronger bit by bit as he continued to power Yaya.

Finally— after a certain moment had passed, Yaya's strength surpassed Shin's resistance.

Shin's body sank down ten metres, crashing into the floor.

(4)

Leaping off Sigmund, who had reverted into his smaller form, Charl landed firmly on solid ground.

The small dragon was falling out of the sky like a dying bird, and Charl hurriedly hugged onto him.

“Sigmund! Get a hold of yourself! Are you ok? Stay calm!”

“I... can't say I'm fine. But at the very least, my life's not in danger.”

His reply was weak. He looked worn out, his neck was drooping and he was breathing shallowly.

He had lost a wing and his right arm. His flank was cut open and stained with blood. Charl hugged tightly onto him.

“Thank you. You fought well.”

“Can you splurge on more chicken for my lunch?”

“T-that's a different matter entirely!”

“It'll take a while for me to recover. At the very least, I won't be able to do something as reckless as this for a while.”

“I understand... Thank you.”

While hugging onto Sigmund, Charl wiped away her tears with the back of her hand.

Lifting her face up resolutely, she turned towards the twins.

Meeting Charl's gaze, the two of them cringed in fear.

"Now, hand over your gauntlet!"

She spoke in a threatening voice. The twins flinched.

"N-no way! No way no way!"

"Rosenberg will get mad at us!"

"Hmph. Don't worry. Rosenberg will soon be defeated anyway."

The twins were stupefied. They glanced at each other—

""No way!""

Their answer was in stereo sound. Charl's nerves finally snapped.

"Hurry up and hand them over! Stop whining like a pair of losers, you brats!"

Grabbing onto the twins who were trying to escape, Charl forcibly removed their gloves from their hands.

""Uwaaaaah!""

"D-don't cry! You're making it look like I bullied you!"

At any rate, with this the two of them were now out of the Night Party.

Charl walked briskly out of the pool, like she was trying to flee the sounds of them crying.

"Now, we should hurry to Raishin."

“Hm. In the first place, it’s not like we’re in any condition to help anymore... both you and I.”

However, they had no choice but to go. Without realising it, she moved at double quick time as she held onto Sigmund and ran down the tunnels.

(5)

Loki left Frey’s side, walking over to the enemy.

In front of him was the bloody Rosenberg and his knight.

There was no more intent to fight. The knight was standing there blankly. On the other hand, Schneider’s eyes were glowing with killing intent as he glared sharply at Loki.

Behind Loki, Frey grew tense. She was worried about her brother’s body. But she trusted Loki, watching him go.

“Hmph... How absurd. That butler was more the finished article.”

Like kicking a man when he was down, Loki spoke to Rosenberg.

“Specialisation of your abilities backfired on you. For the automaton that focuses on repose, because of the stability it brings loses its ability to instantly react. And for the automaton that focuses on movement, because it cannot alter its path once it’s locked in, the truth is that it’s extremely fragile.”

Like Loki said, the shield knight had its movements sealed off, while the sword knight was slashed from its back.

It was easier said than done though. Loki had controlled both the short swords and Cherubim in tandem, initialling both wave-like attacks and focused attacks by himself. It was only possible because of the unparalleled ability of his magic art and his own technique.

“Hand over your gauntlet. Your war ends here.”

Loki extended his hand towards Cherubim. Cherubim instantly changed into its large sword form, and floated over into Loki's hand. Even though it was huge, it was as if it had no weight at all.

A flash of fear ran through Rosenberg's eyes.

"Wait. Do you intend to kill us?"

"I won't repeat myself a third time. Hand over your gauntlet."

Raising a hand to silence Schneider's roar of anger, Rosenberg removed his gauntlet.

A pearl white glove. The proof of entry to the Night Party. Rosenberg threw it with contempt at Loki's direction. Schneider clicked his tongue, but following Rosenberg, he removed his gauntlet as well.

Using telekinesis to bring the glove to him, Loki hands closed around the two gloves.

Losing interest in them, Loki turned his back on the defeated pair.

In that moment, a large surge of magic energy and killing intent welled up behind him.

Frey shuddered. This wasn't under the regulation of the executive committee. Just because the gauntlet had been surrendered didn't mean that the fight was over!

Fast than Frey could get her warning out, the enemy had already leapt into action.

Up till now the knight that had stood wordlessly there— Rosenberg's knight, silently sprung towards Loki's back. There was a flash of steel in her hands. She had drawn a knife, and although it was something done in haste, its small body slammed into Loki's back.

There was a dull sound as blood gushed out into the air in a thin line.

The knight's helmet was sent flying into the air.

With the helmet knocked off, a beautiful girl's face was revealed underneath.

Before Loki's eyes, Frey's own eyes widened. It was understandable. There was no way his slow sister could have ever guessed that there was a girl underneath all that armour.

The girl's face was now resting on his shoulder. Her beauty reminded Frey of one of the forest elves. However blood was overflowing out of her mouth now, and before Frey's eyes her white skin was becoming stained crimson.

Rosenberg channelled more magic energy over, but unfortunately for him, the knight was no longer moving.

There was a large sword embedded in her chest.

Especially compared to her small body, the sword seemed even larger than it normally was.

Sophia had a weak, transient smile on her face as she softly whispered.

"You really are kind... Loki."

"... If I may say so, I am a tolerant person but I'm not as naïve as him."

Her magic circuit specialised in defence. Leaving aside any deficiencies in her puppeteer, if she activated her circuit with her own volition, something of this level could have been easily defended against. However, the current reality was that with the large sword stuck through her chest, Sophia's Eve's Heart was completely destroyed.

Loki gently removed the large sword, supporting the unsteady girl as he carried her in his arms.

"I want you to kill me."

A few hours earlier— As dusk approached the grove of trees, Sophia made that request.

“I... used to be human. Up till a year ago, at least.”

“... You’re still human now.”

“Yup, Loki told me I’m human. Because of that,”

A soft and pretty smile, which brought to mind the image of a white rose.

“Rather than being destroyed as a doll on some unknown battlefield, rather than being dismantled as defective goods after a failed experiment, I want to die as a human by Loki’s hand.”

Her eyes were as earnest as a prayer. Loki was at a loss, as he didn’t have the heart to turn her down.

“... Fine. However—“

Putting as much kindness as he could into it, he awkwardly— and bluntly spoke.

“That day is still a long way off. If war ever starts and you have to stand on the battlefield...”

“Promise?”

“Yeah.”

Sophia’s hand slowly reached out to his. Loki grabbed on to her hand, squeezing it tightly.

Sophia was smiling, her head resting on Loki’s shoulder.

“You... kept your promise...”



She

seemed blissful. Calm. Pure.

“Thank you.”

She was gone. Her pupils dilated as the light went out of her eyes.

In an instant, what had been holding her body together loosened, and her body crumbled away like petals falling off a flower, vanishing with the wind.

“... How careless. We’re retreating!”

Faster than he had spoken, Rosenberg fled at full speed. It looked like he was literally fleeing for dear life. Moving his wounded limbs desperately, he fled together with Schneider.

Watching them flee, a violent killing intent began to build up inside Loki.

There was a roar and the sound of fire as Cherubim heated up. However—

He ground his teeth for a few seconds.

Loki turned his back on the defeated, walking back towards Frey.

Frey gradually teared up, forcibly hugging Loki.

“What... are you doing?”

“Uu... It’s ok, you know?”

“... What?”

“It’s ok to cry, you know?”

Separating, she smiled at him.

In an instant, something welled up in Loki’s chest.

However, it was only for an instant. Loki was back to his usual dour face.

“Who would cry, foolish sister.”

Frey hugged Loki again. During a certain point in time the Garm types had gathered around, and now they sat surrounding the siblings, happily wagging their tails.

(6)

The destruction caused by Yaya wrecked a hole in floor of the hall.

The floor continued to crumbled and fall into the darkness below. Out of that darkness, Yaya came flying up.

Somersaulting in the air, she landed next to Raishin. The impact of her landing caused the floor to crumble.

Raishin hurriedly beat a retreat. The gaping chasm chased after him, and Raishin and Yaya both fled to a corner of the hall.

He couldn't see anything beneath the floor. Rather surprisingly, a cavern was opening up beneath them.

(This is... don't tell me—)

A shiver crept down his neck. His whole body felt like it was experiencing the worst kind of fear. The next instant, countless eyes suddenly popped up from within the darkness below.

Eyes. They were without a doubt, eyes. An innumerable number of them. They were all darting around like they were searching for their target— then suddenly, all of them fixated on Raishin.

It was that! During that time with Henri, what he felt wasn't just his imagination!

Then, this place... was connected to that underground cave from back then!

“Ah, Raishin! Alice is—!”

His thoughts were interrupted by Yaya's voice. She was pointing to the opposite side of the room, where the floor was crumbling away, where Alice was standing completely still like a scarecrow.

Even though the collapsing floor was reaching where she stood, Alice didn't attempt to escape at all.

Faster than he could think, his body was already moving. Ignoring Yaya's voice, he ran on the edge of the ruined floor, jumping over the fissures, kicking himself off the falling debris as he leapt towards Alice.

As if his timing was planned, Alice lost her footing then.

He caught her in mid-air, reaching out with all his strength.

Reach, he willed his fingers as he extended and grabbed onto the edge of the broken floor.

There was a sudden increase in mass weighing him down. Even though she was slim, Alice was heavy. She weighed as much as an adult male!

His tendons creaked ominously, and the pain running through his arm felt like his muscles was tearing apart.

He gritted his teeth. Flecks of blood began to gather on his lips. Even then, Raishin didn't let go of Alice.

"Raishin! Don't move! I'm coming over!"

Yaya yelled. Although she said that, there was no good footing, and everywhere looked like it was going to crumble at any time. If she jumped, the impact of the landing might cause the area where Raishin was to crumble in a chain reaction.

While Yaya was being perplexed, Alice turned to face him.

"What... is the meaning of this?"

Alice vacantly muttered, her voice as blank as her expression.

“Are you trying to commit a lovers’ suicide? Let go—“

“No!”

Raishin shouted, looking downwards. All he could see was darkness. The last time this happened there had been a steep slope of sand that aided his descent, but if anyone were to fall off that cliff, there would have been no way help would ever come.

“You... You have to survive, and apologise to Charl! And Henri! How the hell can you selfishly die like this!? I won’t accept it!”

Looking at Raishin’s firm grasp on her hand, Alice smiled wryly.

“You don’t have to pity me. I’m sure you’ve already noticed it by now, haven’t you?”

“What!? I don’t care, grab onto my hand!”

“The reason I’m using Brocken even without a magic tool— why I can use Brocken.”

“Huh!?”

In an instant, like petals scattering, Alice skin broke.

He could see above her sleeve and below her skirt, and what he saw was the metal of armour.

The left hand Raishin was grabbing onto, her left leg— probably half her body— it was all man-made!

“An automaton...?!”

“Correct. Over half my body has already been converted to a machine, but I’m not a *Maschinensoldat* though.”

“Shut up! So what!?”

Alice's eyes widened. Raishin was shouting in desperation now.

"If you're an automaton, then become mine! I'll straighten out your twisted spirit!"

Alice's jaw dropped.

He could feel killing intent from Yaya drifting over, but that wasn't important now.

Alice looked downward, strength leaving her body entirely.

Through the metal of her arm, Raishin thought he felt a slight trembling from her.

(Is she... crying?)

However, when she lifted her head up, it had her usual carefree smile.

"I'll tell you something good, Raishin. Something even Shin doesn't know."

"What are you saying!? Hurry up and grab my hand! Your arm is slipping—"

"My real father is Edward Rutherford."

She had a satisfied smile on her face. The next instant, she used her right hand to swipe at Raishin's arm.

There was a horrible sound of something popping, and Raishin's wrist gave way.

His wrist had dislocated! His grip lost its strength. Alice's arm began to slip out of his grasp, with Raishin unable to do anything about it.

Raishin was at his wits' end as he could only watch Alice get swallowed by the darkness.

"Raishin! Are you ok!?"

Yaya was finally close enough, and she carefully but gently pulled Raishin up.

Raishin was still dumbfounded, continuing to stare at the bottom of the hole for a long time.

(Edward... Rutherford... The headmaster...!?)

The bottom of the darkness remained impenetrable to the eye.

Epilogue – As Exquisite as Fine Wine

Raishin collapsed onto the floor which was partially caved in.

Yaya looked worriedly at their feet. The floor was still crumbling away, and it was about to reach them.

“What should we do, Raishin? The only way out of here is already...”

“Let’s see... Maybe we can smash our way up through the ceiling...?”

Although he said that, he had no magic energy left to power Yaya up to do that.

Even if he had a plan in mind he had no way to execute it. Raishin took a deep breath, and twisted his wrist back with determination.

There was a popping sound as his wrist slid back into its socket.

“Raishin... Alice is...”

“Did you crush Shin’s heart?”

“Ah, no... I didn’t deal a fatal blow.”

“Then it’s fine. The two of them are probably alive.”

The darkness below them was dark. However, those two weren’t the sort who would be done in so easily.

With a low rumble, floor beneath his butt crumbled away, causing Raishin to retreat rapidly.

It was finally time. Just as he feared the worst, he suddenly heard the sound of wind.

From the entrance to the hall, a steel coloured dragon came gliding through the air.

“Raishin! Are you ok!?”

“Charl! You came at a great time!”

The two of them leapt onto Sigmund’s back. At the same time, the floor completely caved in.

Charl fired a Lustre Cannon at the ceiling, creating an escape route.

She chose the shortest and most direct route to the surface. Just as they came flying out of the building, the light from a magic art shone directly into their eyes. It was as bright as the afternoon. The light was illuminating a circular area that looked like old amphitheatre, and Loki and Frey’s figures could be seen.

With a flap of his wings, Sigmund landed in the middle of the area.

With Yaya’s help, Raishin got off Sigmund’s back. Frey came running over, her ample bosom heaving with each step, but then she tripped on her muffler and fell over.

“Raishin... Did you do it?”

“Yeah. It looks like you guys managed to succeed here too.”

Raishin’s eyes were focused on Loki’s hands. There were two gloves gripped firmly in them.

“Rosenberg was the 74th, right? Charl got two, I got one, and right now Professor Kimberly probably has four with her...”

They had made a clean sweep up till the 74th position. That was roughly a quarter of the gauntlet holders gone. Along with Frey and Loki, if he defeated the other seventy-four people... he would be able to reach him!

“It’s already ten... Alright, we need to go to the field of battle. Frey needs to fulfil the time obligations tonight.”

Before he finished his sentence heaven and earth seemed to switch places, and Raishin tumbled unsteadily on his feet.

“Raishin! Are you ok?”

“Yeah... Sorry, Yaya. We should hurry and return to the doctor’s office.”

Yaya rapidly turned gloomy, leaving their circle and turning her back on everyone.

“It looks like Yaya really should leave... Yaya shouldn’t be with Raishin anymore...”

“Wait, what are you saying?! Just whose sake do you think we—“

Charl was indignant. Biting her hair, Sigmund pulled her back, silencing her.

Raishin walked up to Yaya, calling out to her obstinate figure.

“Don’t drag up the same problem, Yaya. The only partner for me is you.”

“But... Yaya fell completely for the enemy’s trap... someone as stupid as me will eventually end up being the cause for Raishin’s downfall...!”

“You made a promise, didn’t you? Two years ago.”

“But back then—!”

Her voice choked up. There were tears falling down Yaya’s cheeks, and her slim shoulders were trembling.

Charl and Frey had curiosity written on their face. Even Loki flashed Raishin a glance.

“To protect Yaya, Raishin...! Raishin’s back was...!”

“That’s right. I almost died. But you made an oath. You’d always protect me. No matter when, as long as you lived.”

“__”

“You have to fulfil that oath.”

Slowly turning around, Yaya looked at Raishin with eyes seeking permission.

“Are you really... ok with Yaya?”

“I already told you. You’re the only partner I need.”

A relieved Yaya finally relaxed, flying into Raishin’s arms while sobbing.



“Hmph... After going through all this trouble, if the two of you had t made up even after that,

I’d have taken both of you to task.”

Looking over at Charl, who was smiling wryly, Loki, who had a sour look, and Frey, Raishin bowed.

“I’m in your debt. Thanks for your help this time.”

“Uu... are you going to repay us?”

“Of course.”

“Then... a date...”

“H-how sneaky Frey! I also did my best here!”

“Charl... you already went on a date before.”

Although they should have been getting along, for some reason there were stormy clouds brewing on that front as the two of them glared at each other. However Raishin had already switched his focus to elsewhere other than the two girls.

Ever since earlier, Loki had been silent, staring far off into the distance.

What lay before his gaze, if it could be called that, was nothing. Just the traces of battle and some broken armour.

“What’s wrong Loki, did you eat something bad? Are you hunting for food?”

“Don’t lump me into the same category as you, you idiot.”

Loki spoke coldly, then continued speaking but the subsequent tone was like he was speaking to himself.

“If I wasn’t the one to have met her first... if it was you...”

Her—?

“... No, it’s nothing.”

“Don’t leave other people hanging, you idiot.”

“... You’re right. I am an idiot.”

He laughed in self-depreciation. It gave Raishin the creeps, so he whispered to Yaya in hushed tones.

“Did you hear that, Yaya? It looks like he did eat something bad, doesn’t it...?”

“T-this is— Is this the start of Loki’s route?!”

“Huh, what did you just say? Was such a flag even possible?”

Charl’s eyes were sparkling as she seemed to latch on to something she heard. Raishin had no idea what was going on.

Eventually, all of them dragged themselves back, returning to the field of battle where the Night Party was held.

The abandoned armour was buffeted by the wind, but still remained where it lay.

In the end, Loki and Raishin ended up being re-admitted.

Loki slept deeply till the evening of the next day. Frey, who came to visit him, was sprawled on his bed asleep as well, all her fatigue having built up all this while.

Yaya, who had been keeping an eye on Raishin, stepped out to fetch him a glass of water.

The sandman was beguiling Raishin, and he was starting to feel drowsy. It was still bright outside. The sun was higher in the sky as compared to being in Japan— but it was soon time to begin the Night Party.

Suddenly, the fragrance of incense wafted into his nose, causing Raishin to open his eyes.

Was this a dream, or was it reality? A bewitching woman had sat down on his bed. In front of her, there was a beautiful silver haired maiden.

“Shouko... and Irori?”

Irori’s eyes were watery, but they weren’t overflowing, with clear drops that could be seen at the edges.



“Raishin... For saving Yaya, I, Irori, will forever be in your debt.”

She held on to Raishin’s hands. Contrary to his expectations, her skin was warm, like it was burning up.

Irori opened her mouth like she wanted to say something, but she didn’t, and wordlessly stepped back.

“You were reckless again, boy.”

In place of Irori, Shouko spoke. She was speaking severely, but her voice was gentle. It was a like a scolding without the sting. Raishin hadn’t seen this side of her for a while now.

“You’ve defied my orders for the umpteenth time now... But since you saved Yaya, I want to at least let you know I’m grateful.”

Her sleek lips curled into an elegant smile.

“That’s why, even though I’m going to reward you— you have to be punished as well.”

Abruptly, Shouko’s face appeared over Raishin’s.

What did she just do to him?

Irori’s face turned a furious shade of red, and she started to wave her hands frantically in the air.

“Do you best to live on, boy.”

Having said that, she and Irori disappeared, like mist vanishing away. It was as if the whole experience had been an ephemeral dream. Raishin remained dazed for a while, breathing in the lingering smell of incense.

He touched his lips. As he pulled his fingers away, he could see the tips were covered in lipstick.

As soon as he realised the significance of the lipstick, all the blood in his body rushed to his head.

His heart started beating rapidly. Blushing, Raishin turned prostate on his bed, agonising for a few moments.

“Huh... wait, something’s not right. If this was the reward, then what is the punishment—“

Suddenly, a chill went down his spine, and he shivered.

There was a cold air coming from three directions.

Frey had woken up, and she was staring unhappily at Raishin from Loki’s bed.

From outside the window, Charl was sneaking a peek into the room.

Outside the entrance to the ward, Yaya was standing with a crushed cup in hand.

Raishin scratched his head, deciding to tackle the most conspicuous intruder.

“Charl? Isn’t peeking a crime?”

“E-e-even though, even though I was worried and came to see how you were doing—!”

“Raishin... Even though you said... that Yaya’s the only one for you...”

“Raishin... You pervert... Playboy.”

“Wa-wait, why are all of you ganging up together... Calm down!”

Unfortunately, the entrance, and the windows were blocked, which meant all his paths of escape were sealed off.

A few seconds later, the wails of a dying person echoed through the academy.

And once again, the Night Party would begin tonight—

